

The Great Unsnapping of Derry, Maine, circa 2016

by iguessyouregonnamissthepantyraid

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Summary:

“I mean, once you kill the beast that’s usually where the story ends, isn’t it? There’s not supposed to be some crazy... hundreds-of-people-brought-back-from-colonial-fucking-times bullshit, right?”

“Well... in Jaws, they were fighting a shark,” Ben tries, and God, this guy is exactly as too fucking nice

as he was when he was about a foot shorter and two feet wider, because he's actually humoring Richie with this. "We were fighting something decidedly less... normal, so it makes sense that what follows might be a bit abnormal, too."

"A bit abnormal? You're calling all this *a bit abnormal*, Haystack?"

Or: Killing It doesn't just kill It.

Derry is now dealing with a new nightmare of the legal and logistical sort, Richie doesn't want to look a gift turtle in the mouth, the Losers Club is better with kids than their parents ever were, and Eddie Kaspbrak is a mess. Not that that's news to anyone.

1. you know, i feel like the world got smaller

Author's Note:

to those of you reading my other wips, both of which got shoved to the wayside for three weeks in favor of... whatever this is: sorry? i legitimately have no idea what came over me

i just... i have no excuse for this, it's pure indulgence, if i'm gonna write a fix-it i'm gonna *fix it*, dammit

so yeah this is essentially a fluff piece in which i bring everybody, and i do mean everybody, back to life. **that being said!** there is lots of angst of the i-thought-you-were-dead sort, particularly in the first chapter, and there are mentions (but no actual depictions) of past suicide, child death, and domestic abuse. again, no depictions, but it's clear that that's what happened before all this, so please stay safe my lovelies

Jonathan Miller is fourteen years old when he dies.

When he dies, he is running as fast as his feet will take him, shoes pounding along the cobblestone street of his hometown, heart pounding wildly in his ears. Behind him, somewhere in the near-dark of twilight, yellow eyes gleam from the blackened sockets of at least a dozen skeletal warhorses giving chase after him with all the force and speed of a railway train. When he dies, he is terrified and alone, and in his mad dash to escape he twists his ankle the wrong way and trips, and he hardly lives long enough after that to regret it.

When he dies, the year is 1881.

And somewhere, in the deep cavernous caves beneath Jonathan Miller's hometown, in the caves that would one

day be excavated and rebuilt into a sewage system, beneath the town that had been named Derry after its first settlers over a century before Jonathan Miller was born, he is now waking up over a century after his death.

He is blinking the sleep from his eyes, lifting his head from where he lies facedown in the mud, frowning and squinting until his vision adjusts to the low light.

He cannot quite remember the fear that had gripped his heart the last time it beat. It was a long time ago, after all, even if he does not know that.

All he knows, at the time of his waking, is this: He is cold and uncomfortable, and there is water seeping into his clothes, and there is a dull throbbing in his ankle, and he must be somewhere underground, maybe in a cave.

And just in front of his face, lazily making its way across the cave floor, is a turtle.

Jonathan might blame this on the grogginess later, but in the moment, he could *swear* the turtle winks at him.

But this is not Jonathan Miller's story.

Fourteen-year-old Jonathan Miller is not the first of Derry's residents to find himself alive again under those mysterious circumstances, nor will he be the last. He is not the first in what the townspeople — and the people on the outskirts of town, and soon everyone from Portland

to Bangor, and not long after that the national news — would call *The Waking* for lack of any better term.

He was not the last person killed by the creature that had made Its home in the sewer system of Derry, Maine, and so he is not the first person resurrected upon Its death.

That privilege, for better or for worse, belongs to Edward Kaspbrak.

Eddie returns to awareness in the same way he'd left it: violently, reeling and gasping for air in the pitch black dark, no feeling whatsoever in his legs but *far too much* in his chest and his back and his head.

Ash and dirt and grime coats his tongue and the roof of his mouth all the way down into every bronchi of his lungs — fuck, fuck, shit, his *lungs* — and Eddie ineffectually scrabbles at his chest with one hand while fumbling along his pockets with the other.

His inhaler, his inhaler, he needs—

He doubles over before he can find it, or he topples over at least, since he's already sitting, and catches himself on one elbow so that he's at least hacking something up onto the *ground* rather than all over his clothes. His heaving sputtering coughs won't stop, slicing through the silence around him and echoing back to his ears, and he can barely fucking imagine trying to stop them even if— *God*, is he about to eject the lining of his lungs? Is he gonna die here? Isn't he already—?

The coughing won't let him complete a thought. It wracks his ribs and torches through his throat all the way down and shakes some awareness into the rest of his body, and some distant part of his brain remembers to be relieved that he has not, in fact, been paralyzed from the waist down, but the rest of his brain is too busy with an erratic stream of *what the fuck what the fuck whatthefuckishappeningtome—*

Eventually, the hacking dies down into something less like dry heaving and something more like an itch at the back of his throat and deep within his chest, and Eddie knows he can't just *lie down* where

he's at, he's got to get up, who knows what the hell could be all over this floor and he does *not* need that on his clothes or in his hair—

He knows all of that, but he rolls over flat onto his back anyway.

Cold stone greets him there, which is nice. The only sound is that of his own heaving breaths, which is... less nice.

He could stay here, though, he thinks. Let the ground swallow him up.

Isn't he dead anyway? *Fuck*, he could have sworn... His memory's edging on hazy, but he remembers... light, a whole fucking lot of it. The swirling deadlights. Cold metal in his hands. Light and *fire* and a burst of pain in his chest, all feeling trickling away from his fingers and his toes and then from everything all at once, and—

And Richie. He remembers Richie.

Richie, shoving a bundled up something into his chest with all the grace of a jackhammer. Richie, shaky and pissed off and apparently rendered totally incapable of making a joke—

He's really hurt, guys, we gotta get him out of here.

How? How are we supposed to do that, Richie?

But Eddie very much would rather not think about that, about *any* of that, thank you very much, so he closes his eyes. Not that it matters. Can't see his hand in front of his face anyway, or couldn't, if he was willing to spare the effort of lifting his hand in the first place. The sounds of the cave — because that's where he is, it has to be, he's still in the fucking cave under Neibolt, his final resting place is this dank musty rat-infested underground *swamp* — echo back to him.

His own breathing. Labored, but there.

Somewhere off to this right a rhythmic dripping of water.

Drip-drop, pause. Drip-drop, pause. Drip-drop, pause.

Something shifting, rustling. Rats? God, are there really rats down

here still? Is he in the *actual* sewer system or in some fucked up version of the afterlife—?

Sniffing.

There's... someone sniffing? Somewhere? Or is it him doing that?

Finally Eddie finds the wherewithal to lift his hand and not so much *prod* at his face like he'd meant to but just— lay it there, flat over his mouth and nose and eyes. His fingertips end up at his hairline. His palm rests over his right cheek, and he shoves the heel of his palm across his mouth, wiping away grime and spit and probably blood, too, until his face feels somewhat normal. With the back of his fingers, still relatively clean, he swipes at the corners of his eyes where he'd let some tears slip during his relentless coughing fit.

So he's disgusting, and grimy, and bloody, and he's pretty fucking certain he was dead, and he's still not *entirely* sure he's not.

But he's not sniffing. That's someone else.

As that thought sinks in, a cold spike digs into his chest, ice wrapping around his heart and driving its frantic beating into his ears. Someone else is down here. Someone else is down here, in the cave under Neibolt, making sniffing sounds and also maybe rustling sounds and maybe they're causing that *drip-drop-pause drip-drop-pause drip-drop-pause*, too, maybe they're dripping blood or vomit or pus, maybe they're shuffling along on barely working legs withered by disease, shuffling along the sewage tunnels searching for him, searching for Eddie, and *Eddie's all alone down here—*

Breathe, he tells himself, scrunching his eyes shut.

Breathe, Eds.

That thing was never real anyway, remember?

Without thinking about it, he whispers aloud to himself, "*You're braver than you think,*" and then clamps a hand over his mouth when he realizes that even that hushed whispering may as well have been a fucking *megaphone* in these caves.

Fuck.

The sniffing cuts off.

Oh, shit, fuckfuckfuck.

Eddie swallows the fear down, deep down where he can effectively ignore it, deep down into wherever he shoved it when he made himself throw that spear.

He opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, someone else beats him to it.

“H— Hello? Is someone there?”

The icy fist around his heart pauses, stutters, slackens its grip but remains there, wary, and Eddie feels himself frowning, feels the lines forming between his eyebrows.

It's a *kid*.

The kid asks again, shaky and scared, “Who's there?”

“Uh—” is all Eddie can manage at first, and then he clears his throat and tries again. “It's, uh... I'm... Eddie? My name's Eddie. What—? Who're you?”

“I'm n-not...” the kid starts up again, but the voice dissolves into incoherency, the sniffing picking right back up and escalating into actual sobs.

Eddie grits his teeth and forces himself up onto his elbows.

If this is really a kid he's hearing, then that kid is down here in the dark and scared out of their fucking mind, and Eddie is the only adult down here with them, the only adult in all of *existence* for all he goddamn knows, so he's got to do something to help, *anything* to help. Even if he's *also* down here in the dark and scared out of his fucking mind and hasn't got a single clue how to talk down a terrified little kid in the *best* of circumstances, let alone here. Whatever. Shit.

And of course, if it's not really a kid, if it's a trick, if it's Pennywise—

Well. Pennywise already killed him once. If he's gonna do it again, it'll be while Eddie's trying to help a scared little kid, *not* while he's cowering with his back plastered to some musty cave floor.

With that final thought, Eddie lurches up to sitting, and he smacks at the headlamp that's still strapped around the top of his skull. The light flickers, surging brightness that burns his retinas and flickers right out again, once, twice, three times, so that he's not only in pitch darkness but also blinking blots away from his vision.

Fantastic. Fucking wonderful.

Sighing, he reaches into his pocket and fumbles for his cell phone, thinking *surely it's gonna be cracked to shit, even the case couldn't have made it through all that, that's the whole reason I brought the headlamp, yeah, go ahead and make fun of it, Richie, it's convenient and hands-free and more durable than a cell phone and do you want to trek through this disgusting disease-ridden place without even being able to see?*

He finds his cell phone, wakes the screen, and finds that the case is indeed very cracked but the phone underneath — while bearing a crack or two of its own — is nonetheless functional. Only thirteen percent battery left, not a single bar of signal available to call anyone, not even a location signal, but still functional.

God, he will never hear the end of it if Richie finds out his phone lasted longer than the headlamp.

He stands up on legs that are like sticks of Jell-O, turning on the phone's flashlight and dousing the cave in a cone of white light that has him squinting until his eyes adjust, and he clears his throat again.

"Hey," he calls out, because the kid is still crying. "Hey, it's okay, it's okay. Everything's, uh... fine. Where, uh...?"

He finds the kid a second later, though, as he sweeps the light around the cave and stops it on the first thing that's *not* an endless stream of blackish brownish cave wall.

"Oh," Eddie says, wanting to hit himself for it. "Hey."

Real fuckin' articulate, Eds.

The kid is a girl, curled up with her knees to her chest and her back to a crevice in the wall. Her hair's pulled away from her face in a messy ponytail so that Eddie can see, plain as day in the shining light of his cell phone, a tear-and-snot covered face and a little blotchy red birthmark on her right cheek and a pair of wide terrified eyes centered on him.

"Hey, hey, hey, it's okay," Eddie tells her, shining the light on the ground in front of her so it's not blinding her anymore. "It's okay."

She can't be more than, what? Ten? Eleven?

What the hell is she even doing down here?

The girl snuffles, scrubbing at her face with the sleeve of her jacket. "Why're you hiding in the d— dark?"

"I'm not," Eddie answers right away, because, well, he's *not*, and even though he knows he probably looks like he's just been beaten half to hell, or possibly *literally* all the way there and back, he lifts the phone over his head and shines the light on himself anyway. "It's just... you know, dark in here. Really dark. But I'm not hiding."

He crouches down, shifting the light to center on the five feet or so of ground between them, so they can still more-or-less see each other.

And here's the thing. Eddie's never really been partial to kids. They're loud and careless and fragile and terrifying and *gross*, and they're so much more susceptible to disease, so much more prone to becoming walking carriers, and God knows he never even *considered* having kids of his own, never would have considered it even if Myra didn't hate kids enough for the both of them, because everyone always says that when you have a kid you end up caring about nothing else in the world at all because you're so hyper focused on *that one kid's* well being, and God, Eddie's a nervous wreck enough over colleagues and people he hardly knows on a day to day basis, let alone a whole tiny human that could end up contracting any number of horrible illnesses and injuries—

So, no. Eddie would never have said he particularly likes kids.

But Jesus, he's not made out of fucking *stone* either.

"Hey," Eddie says for maybe the hundred millionth time. "What's your name?"

The kid frowns, snuffles, wipes snot all over her sleeve again. "V—Vicky."

"Vicky," he repeats. "Okay. Vicky. Do you...? Uh, here, do you want...?"

He reaches into his jacket pocket again, finds nothing, reaches into his other jacket pocket, still nothing, and he *knows* he's got one around here somewhere, and his knees are screaming at him from maintaining the crouch, so he huffs a sigh and sinks down onto his butt on the cave floor and digs through his pockets one at a time.

Finally, he finds it, and he yanks the tissues out from his back left pocket. Sitting cross-legged and thumbing one tissue out of the pack, he leans forward and stretches across the gap between them so she can grab it.

"For your, uh... you know, your whole—" Eddie very articulately waves at his own face with the hand still holding the tissue, and then reaches out to hand it to her again, pinched between his middle and pointer finger.

Vicky frowns at him some more, and then she reaches out for the tissue, slowly at first, then snatching it away like she's worried he'll change his mind. She wipes it all over her face, which really only smears everything around, and then she ineffectually blows her nose into it, which Eddie does his best not to cringe at. Eugh.

She tries to hand it back, and Eddie can't help flinching away. "No, no, that's... fine. You keep it. That, uh... It's yours now. You feel better?"

Vicky sniffs again, rubs the tissue on her nose, and nods.

"Okay. Good. Cool, cool, cool, yep, good," Eddie says, nodding a little frantically and putting the rest of the tissue packet in his jacket pocket. If this kid does end up being a trick, if she does end up being

Pennywise, Eddie will hate to admit it but he'll honestly be a little impressed at this point. None of that clown's tricks have ever gone on this long without something... well, *horrifying* happening.

He is now reasonably certain that she's really just a kid.

Ninety-five percent at the very least.

"Okay. Vicky, I'm Eddie. How old are you?"

"I'm— I'm nine."

Nine. Jesus Christ. "Okay, uh... Do you know how you ended up here?"

She shakes her head, more frantically than his nodding.

"That's fine, that's okay," Eddie says, biting back on the automatic *me neither*, because you're not supposed to tell kids when you don't have everything under control, right? Shit, he is so unqualified for this. "Uh... Okay. So what's the last thing you do remember?"

At that, Vicky's eyes grow wider and wider and wider, tears building up in them again until her whole face crumples and she buries it in the tissue, wracking with sobs.

Shit!

"Woah, woah, woah, woah, it's okay! It's okay! You don't have to talk about it, I just—"

"He— he was—" Vicky sobs, curling into a tighter ball, "— was s'posed to— help— he said he— said he's my *friend*— and— and— he—"

Dread abruptly curls around Eddie's entire chest and makes its home there, like cigarette smoke depositing tar into his lungs and seeping down into his stomach.

"Who said he was your friend, Vicky?"

"The— the— the *clown*—"

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck, okay.

There's a connection there at least. A horrifying connection, but a connection. This little kid was attacked by Pennywise, probably *killed* by Pennywise just like Eddie was — and objectively Eddie knew It attacked kids, knew It killed kids, just look at Georgie, but seeing one of Its victims in front of him a sniveling crying mess drives that point home a little too fucking deep.

But here she is, alive and whole and terrified, just like Eddie is, too.

“Hey, you know what? You don't have to worry about that clown anymore,” Eddie tells her, which mercifully gets her sobbing to ebb for the briefest of seconds. Her big red-rimmed eyes lock onto his. “Me and a bunch of my friends, we—” *Is this something you're allowed to say to kids? Oh, fuck it—* “we killed It. That clown was... It was like a monster from a scary story, or the bad guy from a comic book, right? And we beat It. Squashed It like a spider. It's gone.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, and in the back of his mind he sees the deadlights fading, remembers shoving Richie away from him with the last bit of strength he still had, too weak to actually say *go, go help them, go kill that fucking clown, I'll be fine*, but apparently succeeding in communicating it anyway. “Yeah, really. And I think... I think we're safe from It now?”

Don't! Say it! Like a question! You fucking moron!

“We're safe. Yeah. Safe. Definitely safe. A-ok. All we have to do is get out of this cave, and we're home free.”

Vicky scrubs at her face with the tissue again, even though at this point it's even dirtier than she is, and she says, “I wanna see my mom.”

“I'll get you to her,” Eddie answers without hesitation. “I'll take you

to her.”

“Promise?”

“Promise! Yeah! Promise,” Eddie can’t help a nervous, borderline manic laugh, but she seems to think it’s a genuine one, so that’s a relief. “We’ll get out of here together, yeah? Both of us, together, and I’ll help you get to your mom. Sound good?”

Eddie reaches for her with his free hand, palm up, intending for her to shake his hand to seal the promise, but instead she grabs hold of it with both of hers and holds on tight, the dirty tissue pinned against his knuckles, her tiny fingers wrapped around the side of his palm. She doesn’t let go, and after a brief moment of adjusting to the reality of a snot-soaked tissue touching him and a barely suppressed shudder, Eddie doesn’t either.

Instead he squeezes her hands back and offers her a small, tight-lipped smile.

“Okay. Yeah. Good. Let’s get out of here, come on.”

Between the effort of getting Vicky up to standing, and switching his phone over to battery saver mode, and shaking out the tingling numbness in his own legs, and subtly checking Vicky over for injuries and finding none, and asking her if she’s hurt, and ignoring the voice of his mother at the back of his head saying *just because she says no doesn’t mean she’s right you know children don’t know any better Eddie you never did know your limits*, and then finally trying to navigate their way out of the cave under Neibolt...

Well, it's a process. It takes a little while.

And in that time, it becomes very apparent that they're not the only ones here, either.

The second person Eddie finds is another kid, around Vicky's age or maybe younger, with a vaguely familiar face. He's not crying — nearly scares the piss out of Eddie, quiet as he is. He's practically catatonic, won't so much as look at Eddie, won't say more than a few clipped words at a time, and even that much Vicky has to coax out of him.

His name is Dean. He won't let Eddie get near him, but he does take Vicky's offered hand, and together they form a human chain on their way out of the caves.

The third person, thank whatever deity might be listening, is an adult. More or less, anyway. Probably in his twenties. And unlike the kids, this guy looks a hell of a lot worse for wear, even considering the fact that they're all wandering a disgusting cave and also, maybe, possibly, have just come back from the dead.

(Eddie's still not totally sure about that one.)

(He doesn't want to think about it.)

The guy looks like he just came out of a bad boxing match. Broken nose, one tooth missing, another chipped, a bad bruise blossoming across one cheekbone, the opposite eye swollen and blackened. All Eddie can think, looking at him, is *that's not Pennywise, that's not something Pennywise would've done to him, it's too physical, too personal.*

And either this new guy actually genuinely loves kids, or he has kids of his own, or he's harnessing that weird ingrained instinct of *I'm an adult and these are tiny fragile children* that Eddie's quickly finding requires no experience whatsoever — but whatever the case may be, the guy offers Eddie a nod and then crouches down to both the kids' heights without another word, offering them a gap-toothed smile that makes Eddie wince. With the bruises, that has *got* to hurt.

“Well, hey,” he says, quiet and gentle.

His voice a distinctly friendly, vaguely effeminate quality to it. It also has the undercurrent of a whistle, and Eddie has the horrifying split-second image of his windpipe being crushed by *whatever* did all the rest of that to him. I mean, Jesus, what the hell happened to this guy?

“Hi,” Vicky says to him.

“Hi. You guys okay?”

“Yeah, we’re okay,” Vicky answers in an instant, a defiant edge to it like she wants to ask *why wouldn’t we be*, like she wasn’t sobbing uncontrollably no more than ten minutes ago. Eddie stifles a grin and gives her hand a squeeze. “Are you okay? You look like you got beat up.”

The guy scoffs, his smirk cocksure despite the bruises. “Oh, no, sweetie, I’m fine. You should see the other guy.”

Vicky’s eyes bug out. “Did you fight the clown, too?”

The guy grins wider, bemused. “That’s sure one thing you could call ‘em, yeah. I’m Adrian, by the way.”

Then he holds out a hand for Vicky to shake, which she does, releasing Eddie’s hand for only a second before quickly ending the handshake and gripping Eddie’s again. At least she’s ditched the tissue at this point. The new guy offers his hand to Dean, too, and miraculously — if a little hesitantly — Dean reaches out with the hand not clutching Vicky’s and gives it a skittish once-up-and-down shake. Finally the guy tilts his head to the side, cracking his neck, and he stands to his full height and shakes out his shoulders, turning toward Eddie.

“Adrian Mellon,” he tells Eddie, reaching out to shake Eddie’s hand, too.

That name is familiar, Eddie thinks, but he doesn’t dwell on it. He takes Adrian’s hand.

“Eddie. Eddie Kaspbrak.”

“Kay. Eddie,” Adrian says, nodding as he drops his hand to his side again, and it’s like bringing his attention away from the kids has pulled the veil away — Eddie can see the tension in his smile, the fear in his eyes, the *smallness* of his posture, even in the indirect light of his phone’s flashlight. “You, um... You know how to get out of here, Eddie?”

“Yeah,” Eddie answers without hesitation. “Yeah, I do. Come with us.”

Now, the fourth person — this is the one that makes Eddie really start to question his sanity. This is the one that renders him nearly speechless, the one that sends his heart thudding in his throat all over again, the one that turns his tongue to cotton. *This* is the one that makes him wonder again if he really is alive after all or if he’s actually just some kind of wandering spirit convincing itself otherwise, dragging a bunch of other poor souls along with it.

For a moment, anyway.

The fourth person Eddie Kaspbrak finds in his trek through the Derry sewage system is—

“*Stan?*”

Three days ago, Richie was genuinely *stunned* to find out that the Derry Town House was still standing.

They really hadn't demolished that fuckin' place? Renamed it? Renovated it into something else? A corner store? A minimart? A strip club? *Anything?*

But no, the Derry Town House was definitely still standing, and it was definitely still the Derry Town House. It was still creepy and rundown and apparently employed exactly zero people in terms of room service but packed one hell of a liquor stash. And it was, as it turned out, available.

Go figure.

Three nights, he reserved, with an option to renew. Because he had no fuckin' clue what he was getting himself into when he made that reservation, and yet somehow, on some weird subconscious burned-into-your-brain-and-forcibly-repressed level, he did know that a simple *you don't know what you're getting yourself into, Tozier*, was the mother of all understatements. Even then, he knew that much.

Best to tack on that extra insurance, he remembers thinking. Just in case.

Three nights with an option to renew.

Now, three days later, Richie lies flat on his back on the irritatingly soft hotel duvet, arms stretched out on either side of him like a starfish, his cracked glasses discarded somewhere around here but certainly not on his face, and he stares up at a blurry rendition of the hotel's ridiculous popcorn ceiling and thinks, *I could always renew*.

The rest of them are leaving, he knows.

Leaving, or planning to.

Bill's already hopped on a plane back to London, or he's damn near close. Probably just about finished the drive to Bangor International. Work stuff, he couldn't put it off any longer. They're all prepping for either a text in the groupchat saying *I still remember you guys*, or a whole hell of a lot of disappointment come the morning. One or the other.

Ben and Bev — because it didn't take them too long after getting their memories back to become *Ben and Bev*, thank fuckin' God, their dancing around each other was gonna drive Richie up a wall — are planning to head back together to Ben's place in Nebraska tomorrow. Bev's gonna work on the divorce settlement remotely, doesn't need to go near that shitstain she called a husband again for as long as she lives, which is good. Really good.

And everyone knows that Mike of all people needs to get the hell out of Derry pronto. Christ, Richie doesn't know why he didn't high-tail it out of here the second that clown sputtered its last shitty breath, doesn't know why he didn't disappear so quick there was only a cartoon cloud of dust left in his wake, not after three decades trapped in this godforsaken town. He's planning on leaving, he says. Gonna travel, see the sites, finally make it down to Florida. So he's got the *where* down, he just keeps sounding a little fuzzy on the *when*.

And Richie...

Richie can't bring himself to leave Derry right now, even though he really wants to.

Shit, Richie can't even bring himself to leave this *bed* — which, admittedly, he does not particularly want to. But *still*.

He does know one thing. One thing, in the dark muddled clouds that have overtaken his thoughts this morning. Just one.

Richie Tozier does not want to forget again. He doesn't know why he doesn't want to forget again, because remembering *fucking sucks*, remembering hurts like a bitch, but he knows he doesn't want to forget. Desperately, he does not want to forget. Not again, not this time. Leaving might make him forget, it might not, but he can't take that risk. Not yet. Not until he knows for sure. Not until Bill texts

them back.

And isn't that as good an excuse as any?

He can always renew. He could stay here, in the Derry fuckin' Town House, and he could stay in this bed on its irritatingly soft duvet with his arms starfished at his sides and ribs feeling like they've been cracked wide open and his glasses who-fucking-knows-where and nothing but blurry popcorn ceiling stretching out above him with no end. He could stay here until the bed swallows him up, until the city council or whoever makes these decisions finally gets off their collective asses and *actually* demolishes this shitty hotel and builds up a strip club in its place. Or, fuck it, until the whole of fucking Derry crumbles to pieces around him.

Because hey, it's not here anymore. They killed It, and in some fucked up way Richie feels like It was the only thing holding Derry solidly in this plane of reality.

Like *It was* Derry. Like Derry doesn't exist if It doesn't, and maybe they're all just ripping this hole in reality a little bit wider and a little bit deeper with every minute they stick around, and—

There's a knock at the door.

A soft rap of knuckles on wood, not soft because of hesitation, just soft *because*. Just an innate quality of the fist making the knock.

"Richie?" Bev's voice calls through the door. "You in there?"

Richie doesn't answer right away, because frankly, he knows he doesn't need to.

And, sure enough, the door creaks open an inch at a time. See? Not hesitation. Beverly Marsh goes where she wants when she wants, because she *can*, because she's a grown ass woman, but also because she generally knows where she ought to be and is almost always right about it. Another facet of their childhoods torched from their memories in the Great Derry Exodus, one that's returned in the last few days and settled right back down where it's supposed to be.

Richie, his eyes still on the popcorn ceiling, puts on his best

Humphrey Bogart.

"Of all the shitty hotel rooms, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine."

There's a huff of a laugh, and when Richie lazily rolls his head to the side he sees her blurred silhouette, a fiery orange cloud atop a hazy strip of blue that must be the rest of her. Blue jeans and a bluish greenish sweater.

He turns his gaze back up, waiting until the mattress dips when she sits down somewhere to the left of his head.

She's gonna say something to him, he knows, she must have come here to say something to him, and Richie thinks he might have a good idea what it is. Something along the lines of *you can't wallow around here forever, Tozier, or get the hell up and get back to your life for Christ's sake, or we finally beat It and you're bringing the fuckin' mood down, Trashmouth.*

But she doesn't say any of those things, because of course she doesn't, and Richie feels mildly guilty for expecting anything else.

Instead she pulls her legs up onto the bed and spins around, spins away from him, and there's a creak of the old mattress springs as she flops down onto her back so that her head falls down right beside his, albeit upside-down, her hair splayed over his shoulder. The headboard creaks, too, twice; she must be propping her feet up on it.

Like they're a couple of kids stargazing, or watching clouds roll by.

Richie gulps, pulls out a faint southern twang, and asks, "And how is Miss Beverly Marsh doing on this *fine* afternoon, hmm?"

"Nervous."

"Mm." Richie nods. They're *all* a little nervous, waiting on Big Bill's text like they've all just sent their husband off to war. He drops the accent. "That all?"

"No, not all," she answers right away, open and honest in a way Richie can never quite get himself to be. "I'm also... relieved, of

course. Like a weight's been lifted. I'm still not sure if that's because of Pennywise or because of Tom, but I'm relieved either way. And... sad, definitely sad. Tired, like I could sleep for a week and not regret a second of it. Still really sore, too."

Richie latches onto that. "Ooh, yeah, I'll bet. Haystack giving as good as he's getting?"

Bingo. She snorts, reaching up and smacking his opposite shoulder.

"Kidding, kidding," Richie says, wearing his first real grin of the morning. "Obviously I know he is. That guy's a generous lover or I'll eat my own foot."

Another snort. Her hair tickles his neck as she shakes her head. "We're taking it *slow*, Richie."

"Yeah, no shit, twenty-seven years too slow."

"Well, *that* part's not our fault, you know that."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know."

Richie takes a slow breath. Of course he knows. How could he not? They're all in the same boat here, all had their childhood memories wiped out Men-in-Black style, all forgot each other so deeply and so completely that they never even realized they'd forgotten *anything*, right up until their systems were forcibly rebooted as they crossed over the Derry town line.

Of course he knows.

"What about you, Richie?" Bev asks. "How are you doing on this fine afternoon?"

Richie takes another breath, raspberries it out through his lips. "Me? I'm, uh... yeah, I mean, the same. Tired as all hell. Relieved that fuckin' clown's finally gone. Little nervous about Big Bill forgetting us all over again. You know."

"Mm. That all?"

She says it in a deliberate echo of his own words, it's the *exact* same thing he said to her, but even still, the question creeps up his spine and clogs up his throat and pushes that godforsaken pressure behind his eyes again. Richie grits his teeth against it. He is so fucking done with crying.

When he doesn't answer — *can't* answer — Bev gently tilts her head against his, their ears pressed together, and she reaches up to run a hand through his hair.

"I know," she says.

And she does. Mostly. Wouldn't be fair to say she doesn't, because Richie knows he's not the only one feeling... sort of like this, at least. Sure as hell not the only one to have lost someone, multiple someones, in the last couple days.

Eds was her friend, too.

So was Stanley.

And hell, she's got it worse than the rest of them when it comes to Stan, doesn't she? What with the whole—

Richie goes tense as a new thought, a *terrible* thought, a *really really fucking terrible* thought occurs to him, ice trickling through his veins and his heart suddenly a jackhammer in his throat.

"Bev, you...?"

Her hand pauses in its rhythmic petting through his hair, and she tilts her head toward him. "What?"

"You didn't... Did you know what was gonna happen?" Richie asks, already hating himself for asking at all, but there was no way he couldn't ask. It was either ask or let that thought fester inside him until he was *certain* she'd known all along and done nothing to stop it.

Bev goes tense. Her breath stops.

"Bev, did you know what was gonna happen to Eddie? You... I mean,

you saw Stanley, and—”

“Richie, no,” she interrupts, softly, and he hears her sniff — which, *fuck*, that means she’s already crying, or she already was and he’s made it worse, which means he’s *twice* the asshole now for not keeping his stupid fucking thoughts to himself and for making her cry when she’s already lost two of her best friends in the course of a few days.

You’re in the same shitty boat, remember, Trashmouth?

“Shit, Bev, I’m—”

“I didn’t know,” she says, plowing right through his attempt to apologize. “The deadlights only showed me what would happen if we didn’t...”

“If we didn’t try to kill It,” Richie finishes for her, heart sinking.

Fuck. That’s right.

She nods, sniffs again. “And we did. We didn’t just try to kill It, we really killed it, Richie, and I think—” she’s lying so close that he actually hears her gulp— “I think that changed everything.”

Richie wants to say, *Well, yeah, I sure fuckin’ hope it did, because you and Haystack need to get hitched and make a bunch of supermodel babies and grow old together, and dying horribly would put a little bit of a damper on that, don’t you think?*

Richie wants to say, *Didn’t change everything, though, did it? Stan still died, just like you said. And Eds still died pretty fuckin’ horribly, too.*

Richie wants to say, *Sorry for bringing up the deadlights at all, given that that’s like, literally one of your most traumatic memories ever and I of all people should fucking empathize with that.*

Richie really wants to say, *I fucking miss him, Bev. I miss him so much it doesn’t feel like it’s ever gonna stop hurting.*

He doesn’t get the chance to say any of those things, though.

Because at that moment, there's another knock on the door. Or on the door frame, at least, since Bev never closed the door behind her when she came in. The two of them turn to look at the vague man-shaped silhouette at the door at the same instant that the man-shaped silhouette speaks.

"Hey," Mike says, slightly breathless, which is weird for a guy that's six-foot-four and *jacked*. Can he even run out of breath? "We gotta go."

"What?" Bev asks.

"Derry Home Hospital," Mike says by way of explanation, which really explains nothing at all, and then, "All of us. We gotta go. Throw some shoes on, whatever you gotta do, Ben's already getting the car running."

Bev starts to ask, "Is it—?"

"It's nothing bad," Mike tells her. "At least I don't think it is. But we need to be sure. Be in the car in five minutes."

He taps the door frame on his way to leave, and Richie shouts after him, "Mike! Hey! Mike, what the hell's goin' on?"

"I'll tell you everything I know in the car!" Mike shouts through the Derry Town House halls, evidently in too much of a hurry to even turn back. "Five minutes!"

Eddie is only about... *eh*, let's be generous and say sixty percent sure

that he's not dead.

It was eighty percent about thirty seconds ago, but—

Well. Given the circumstances.

Eddie gulps, subtly tightening his right hand around little nine-year-old Vicky's left, not so subtly sidestepping so that he's more firmly stood in between her (and, by extension, quiet little Dean clinging to her other hand and twenty-three-year-old Adrian bringing up the rear) and what might be a killer clown from space disguised as his dead childhood best friend but also might be a genuine ghost, since, y'know, they might actually all be dead after all anyway. Stan's so fucking close Eddie could reach out and *touch* him if he wanted, which... well, that means Stan or not-Stan could reach out and touch him, too, doesn't it?

He doesn't know where this bravery is coming from. Whether it's the fact that Pennywise has already killed him, or from the knowledge that he is by *far* the oldest person in their little group of four — well, whatever it is, Eddie'll take it.

"Stanley?" Eddie asks, quietly, the first word he's spoken to him. "That really you?"

"You know him?" Vicky asks.

Eddie nods, slowly, but he doesn't dare tear his eyes away from Stan, not for half an instant. Because he does. He does know him. He knows that *face*, recognized it the second his flashlight illuminated it in the tunnels. Twenty-seven years of aging be damned, Stan looks *exactly* the same.

Stan frowns, a look of hesitant wary confusion that's so very *Stanley* coming across his face, and he looks from Eddie, to Vicky, to Dean, to Adrian, and back to Eddie again. He looks almost entirely unhurt, but his jeans are soaked up to the knees with what Eddie has to assume is greywater, exhaustion painted in broad strokes beneath his eyes.

After a moment, though, that familiar face falls and those wary eyes

widen with a realization that Eddie understands all too well.

“Oh, shi—” he breathes, catching himself at the last second and covering his mouth with a fist. He lowers it, though, and asks, “*Eddie?*”

“Yeah,” Eddie answers. “Yeah. It’s... It’s me.”

“Are you—? Are *we*—?”

“You know, I actually don’t think so,” Eddie tells him, and it’s crazy, he thinks, how easy it is to drop back into old rhythms. He knew exactly what Stan was asking, didn’t need to wait, didn’t need to clarify. Stan still looks unsure, so Eddie asks, “I mean, do you *feel* dead, Stanley?”

Stan’s throat works as he thinks, glancing away from Eddie again to take in the accidental entourage he’s gathered behind him, and he shakes his head.

“No, but— I thought... I mean I *really* thought...”

“Yeah,” Eddie finds himself saying, seeing it all in his head again. The look on Bev’s face as she held the phone on speaker, the warbling voice at the other end, the way Eddie’s heart had plummeted down into his stomach.

Guess Stanley could not cut it.

He gulps down the lump in his throat and says, “Yeah, I thought you were, too.”

Stan’s eyes widen. “Shit,” he says, forgetting to reel it in this time, apparently too distraught. “Shit, Eddie, I’m sorry, I didn’t— I thought — I thought maybe if I took myself off the board, we might have a better chance, I thought— maybe—”

Eddie reaches forward with the hand still holding his cell phone, and the flashlight makes a wide arc of light over the tunnel walls as Eddie wraps one arm around Stan’s shoulders and pulls him in close, his chin hooked over Stan’s left shoulder.

“We did it,” Eddie tells him. “We killed It. It’s dead, Stan. *Really* dead.”

Stan’s warm, which is good for Eddie’s sanity, and Eddie can feel his pulse thumping through his shoulder blades, which is *very* good for his sanity. Dead guys don’t feel like this. Of course, less good is the fact that Stan’s also shaking and shivering and probably going to catch a cold or worse in these disgusting sewers, especially with his jeans soaked to the knee and smelling like shit.

“Don’t know what the *hell* you were thinking traipsing around in greywater like it’s nothing,” Eddie finds himself mumbling as Stan finally reaches up to wrap his arms tight around Eddie’s middle. “Basically just gallons of human waste, I mean, I don’t know if you’ve ever even *heard* of a Staph infection, but—”

Stan laughs, tightening the hug to the point that it’s almost painful, but he doesn’t say anything to that.

“It’s really good to see you, Stan,” Eddie whispers, giving him one last pat on the back, or as much as he can with their only source of light still clutched in his hand. And like a good friend, as he steps away, he pretends he doesn’t notice the way Stan’s swiping his knuckles under his eyes. Not that Eddie hasn’t let a few tears of his own slip, of course, but it’s dark here and he’s in control of all the light they’ve got, so who’s gonna know?

“So, uh...” Stan says, taking a breath to steady himself, and he looks at the others. “Who are these guys?”

“Right! Yeah, yeah,” Eddie says, twisting around to regard Vicky and Dean and Adrian. “Everyone, this is— this is Stanley. He’s... a friend. A good friend.”

Vicky’s eyes widen with recognition. “Is he one of the friends that helped you squash the clown like a spider?”

“Oh, uh, no, I—”

“He sure is,” Eddie says, because it’s true, and he thinks if he had a free hand he would clap Stan on the back to drive the point home. As

it is, he just smiles. “And he’s gonna help us find our way out of here.”

“I am—? I am!” Stan recovers quickly, nodding. “Yeah, yeah, no, of course I am.”

“If you helped squash the clown, you should be really good at fighting off sewer monsters,” Vicky informs him with a sagely nod. “You can join our group.”

And Eddie thought Adrian was good with kids, but as it turns out, he’s got nothing on Stan. It’s like a switch has been flipped, and the Stanley who was still reeling from the whiplash of being alive again is no longer here, all that nervousness vanished into thin air, packed neatly into a box where the kids can’t see it. Without missing a beat Stan says, “I would be *honored*, Miss...?”

“Vicky.”

“Miss Vicky,” he says with a little bow of his head. “Well, you’re in luck, because as it turns out I’m a *professional* bodyguard, and my specialty is protecting little kids from sewer monsters.”

At that, Dean peers around from behind Vicky and, to Eddie’s absolute astonishment, he actually speaks. “That doesn’t sound like a real job.”

Stan only grins wider, and he shrugs. “It’s more of a hobby, I guess. My real job is in accounting.”

Dean wrinkles his nose. “That sounds boring.”

“Which is exactly why I fight sewer monsters in my spare time,” Stan tells him, raising his eyebrows with another smile.

“Sounds pretty legit to me,” Adrian offers with a wink at Stan that the kids don’t see.

Dean narrows his eyes but seems to take it without argument, and Stan adds, “As long as I’m around we’ll get out of here in one piece. Promise,” and then he leans to the side and asks Eddie, “You know the way out of here, don’t you, Eddie?”

“Course I do. Yeah, for sure,” Eddie assures him, assures them all, because he does. “We keep making our way up this tunnel, and it should let us out right around the Barrens. Assuming we don’t keep running into more people I thought were— you know,” he says with an apologetic shrug at Stan, which Stan deflects with a shrug of his own, “then it shouldn’t be more than an hour before we’re above ground again.”

Of course, Eddie was telling the truth. He — and Stan and Adrian and the two kids, for that matter — had no way of knowing that his half-joking stipulation would turn out to be true as well. They had no way of knowing that their own resurrections were only the beginning, that because they were among the last whose lives were ended by Pennywise, they were among the first whose lives were restored upon Its death.

Later, much later, when everyone’s stories are corroborated and all the facts are laid bare, it will become clear that the deaths in Derry, brought on in waves separated by precisely twenty-seven years, like clockwork, could be directly correlated with subsequent waves of resurrections.

Precisely twenty-seven minutes after Edward Kaspbrak returns from the dead, George Denbrough opens his eyes for the first time in decades.

And it is well over an hour before Eddie sees daylight again.

“Eddie,” Ben repeats, staring wide eyed at Mike from the passenger seat. “As in... *Eddie*, Eddie.”

“Yeah,” Mike says, eyes ahead. Richie can see them, his eyes, in the rearview mirror, wide and worried and dutifully transfixed on the road. He doesn’t *sound* nervous, but he sure as hell looks it.

To Richie’s left, Bev sits with both of her shoes propped up on the center console, and with her long legs bent up it looks like she’s trying to curl in on herself, a protective shield made out of knees and denim. She bites on one thumbnail, as she has been doing from the moment this drive got started, and says nothing.

Ben glances back at her before his attention’s back on Mike again. “And you’re sure it was him.”

“I’m sure,” Mike nods. “He called, and it was his voice, and the call came from his cell number.”

“And he *said* it was Eddie.”

“Yeah. It was really him, Ben. I know it was.”

“But *how*?”

“I don’t know.”

Richie’s whole general *being* sort of feels numb, from his feet all the way up through his lungs and into his throat, his brain providing nada except for a screen full of static, a *Please Stand By, Technical Difficulties* message in blinking white letters. There is a nonzero chance that he’s actually stopped breathing. Technically he knows he should be freaking out, but it’s like he’s watching all of this play out from somewhere else, somewhere safe, somewhere where the

consequences of this conversation have no effect on him whatsoever.

“And he said he’s at Derry Home?” Ben asks.

“Yeah.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“No, nothing. Just that he’s at Derry Home, and he needed us to come right away. Apparently he didn’t have a lot of time to talk.”

“Not even enough to say why he was at the *hospital*?”

At last, Richie finds his voice, and it’s in the form of a laugh — if what comes out of him then can really be called a laugh, anyway. It’s more like a bark, Richie thinks, borderline hysterical even to his own ears.

“Cause that’s what you do when you get a hole ripped through the middle of your chest, Haystack. You go to the hospital.”

Ben glances over his shoulder and doesn’t quite make it to look at Richie directly behind him, but Richie sees the concerned edge in that GQ-model profile of his, the way his brow creases, the way he meets Bev’s eyes and something seems to pass between them without a word. Ben turns back to face forward, and Mike’s grip tightens on the steering wheel, and Bev leans over to reach across the gap in the backseat and give Richie’s upper arm a squeeze.

Richie takes a breath.

“He wasn’t...” Ben starts to say, hesitates, and then apparently decides to come the hell out with it. “He wasn’t *alive*, Mike.”

Mike nods.

“Then how...?”

“I don’t know.”

“Could always be someone else,” Richie says, quiet, his eyes on the back of Ben’s seat. “Could be *something* else.”

The car falls silent, every single one of them. They were all thinking it, they had to have been.

Richie mutters, "Wouldn't be the first time."

"No," Mike shakes his head. "We killed It."

"Did we?"

"Yeah. You felt that, too, Richie. You saw it."

"Wouldn't be the first time for that, either."

"No, not this time," Mike insists. "Not this time. It's dead. *That* was real. I know it."

"Yeah? How, Mike? How the *hell* do you know that?"

Mike, as always, is completely unfazed by Richie's mounting frustration. Must be incorporating some kind of zen yoga bullshit into all the weightlifting that's got him looking the way he does. Maybe that's why Ben's so chilled the fuck out all the time, too, but then again, Mike was definitely always just like this, even when they were kids.

True to form, Mike doesn't lash out. He just adjusts his grip on the steering wheel, sighs, and says, "I know it, Richie. I know we killed It. And I know that was really Eddie, *our* Eddie, on the phone. I don't know how I know, but I know."

Ben reaches across the center console and lays a hand on Mike's upper arm, a mirror image of Bev doing the same for Richie.

"Well," Ben says, "one way or another, we're gonna find out."

The car kicks dirt up into the air as Mike takes a turn a little too fast, and there's a sign on the side of the road that Richie sees for a split second through his cracked glasses that proudly tells them DERRY HOME H. 12 MILES.

And as Richie's heart rate finally starts to climb until it's rabbiting away against his sternum, he thinks, *Ah, there we go, there's the*

expected panic. Thanks for finally showing up.

There is dirt underneath Eddie's fingernails.

He has washed his hands, thoroughly, no less than *six times* since arriving at the hospital. Six times, and there is still dirt underneath his fingernails.

How the *hell* is that possible?

Of course, it probably doesn't help matters that he's spent the better part of the last — what, twenty minutes, half an hour, he can't be sure, his phone is charging over in the corner and he can't quite bring himself to move — hunched over in the hospital waiting room chair with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him, allowing the perfect opportunity for him to obsessively over-inspect his nails for lack of anything fucking *better* to do. Jesus, he's probably driving himself *literally* insane and seeing dirt that isn't even there anymore while he tries to take his mind off the fact that he hasn't seen Stan for a solid ten minutes at least and he's honestly starting to question whether he ever saw him in the first place and Dean and Vicky and Mattie Clements and Veronica Grogan and Betty Ripsom have all been reunited with their sobbing but smiling parents — or siblings, not that the difference matters much anymore — and that's all good, it's great, but there are still three or four of them here in the hospital who *haven't* found any relatives, and Stan's in another room trying to convince a bunch of police officers that he is in fact *the* Stanley Uris that died in Atlanta three days ago, and Georgie was ferried away from Eddie the second they got in here and the doctors *still won't let him back there to see him*—

Eddie clenches his fists until they shake, then flexes his fingers out, forcing himself to breathe.

Okay, Eds.

Stop sitting here like an idiot. Stop spiraling.

Think.

Here is what Eddie Kaspbrak does not know: He does not know how Stan's alive. He does not know how Georgie's alive. He does not know how *he's* alive, for that matter, or whether his bloodstained (but oddly, untorn) shirt is stained with *his own blood*, but at this point all of that is way the hell down low on his list of concerns.

And Jesus, doesn't *that* say something about his current state?

But what he *does* know is this: Mike is on his way, probably with the others in tow, since in the chaos of the last few days Eddie had never actually gotten around to adding any of the others' numbers to his phone, and Mike is definitely the most reliable of the lot of them anyway. He knows that he's absolutely fucking exhausted, and he wants to see Stan, but more than that he *needs* to see Georgie.

God, he'd thought running into his friend who'd been dead for three days was a shock enough, but — shit, Georgie had been dead for three *decades*. Eddie hadn't just been considering that maybe he'd finally cracked and was hallucinating at that point; he'd been utterly convinced that Georgie was a hallucination, right up until the kids started talking to him, too.

(And, of course, until all the *others* had shown up. Others that disappeared when Georgie did, others whose dead bodies Eddie had *seen* once, seen for himself a very long time ago, others that Eddie had all but completely forgotten after all these years.)

But now, alive or not, figment of Eddie's frazzled brain's imagination or not, Georgie is six years old and confused and terrified and all alone in a hospital room surrounded by doctors, and yeah, maybe Eddie's nearly thirty years older than Georgie remembers him, maybe his voice is deeper and he stands a bit taller and he's got more

wrinkles around his eyes and less hair on his head than Georgie remembers, but Georgie *remembers*.

As soon as he recognised Eddie, as soon as he realized who he and Stan were, suddenly it didn't matter that they were all grown up. To Georgie, apparently, that was enough. It was enough to make him a little less scared, enough to make him feel a little less alone.

And now he's alone again.

Georgie's alone again.

Fuck.

Fuck. Okay. Shit.

Eddie abruptly stands, his fists at his sides, so that the little metal waiting room chair screeches an inch back on the tile, and he makes a beeline for the front desk.

"Hi," he says to the lady sitting there, *Cassy* according to her nametag.

Cassy barely looks up from the stacks of paperwork on her desk. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Yeah, can I get an update on Georgie Denbrough? He's, um..." *He's recently returned from the dead, just like me, and I'd like to speak with him right now please and thank you.* "He was admitted about half an hour ago."

"You're the one that brought him in?"

"Yeah! Yeah, that was me, I'm the one that brought him in," Eddie says, because he is. He's also the one that brought Adrian in for his multiple contusions and the broken cheekbone, and Vicky and Dean and Mattie and all the others for possible hypothermia and to get checked for any other injuries Eddie might have missed, and honestly he could probably stand to be looked at, too, but again. Priorities. "I'm the one that brought him in. Can I see him?"

"Are you related?"

Eddie almost groans aloud. “No, I’m not related to him, he was — is my friend’s little brother.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, which he knew she was going to say, but that doesn’t make it any less infuriating. “Unless you’re family, I can’t let you back to see him, but the last I heard he’s in good condition.”

“In good—? Jesus,” Eddie mutters, shaking his head. “*In good condition*, yeah, sure he is. Listen, there has to be some way I can see him. There has to be.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but unless you’re family, or there’s family here to grant you permission, then I’m afraid there’s not.”

And Eddie almost takes that. He almost drops his shoulders, almost huffs a sigh and says, *Okay, fine, but please let me know if anything changes*, almost heads back to his seat to stew for however much longer he has to.

But he doesn’t.

He’s not sure what takes him over. Maybe it’s the fact that his brain hasn’t *quite* settled down from the whiplash of waking up when he’s been certain, *absolutely certain*, that he was going to die. Maybe it’s the exhaustion, the hours of trudging through the sewers, the fact that his legs feel ready to give out at any moment. Maybe it’s just the worry over Georgie. Or, hell, maybe the ghost of Sonia Kaspbrak actually, literally possesses him for *just* long enough to rip some poor underpaid hospital staff worker a new asshole.

Who the hell knows anymore?

“Look,” Eddie says, planting his palms on the desk. “Cassy? Right? I have had a very, very, very long day, *Cassy*. I am very tired, I’m starving, I’m still pretty sure I *died* today, I definitely remember being impaled and I know for sure that I got stabbed—” he points at the bandage on his cheek for emphasis, like she can’t see it— “and I’ve just spent somewhere around *three fucking hours* leading a bunch of traumatized children *and* a few traumatized adults out of the *sewers*, my phone is just about dead, my clothes are soaked in *shit water*—”

“Sir, I can’t—”

“— and I am very, very close to the end of my rope at this point and I *cannot guarantee* that I’m not about to just actually *lose it* in the middle of this waiting room, so when I say that that is *nothing* compared to what *that kid*—” he jabs a thumb over his shoulder at the doorway they’d taken Georgie through not half an hour ago— “is going through, you should know I’m not— I’m *not* fucking around here, okay? I’m not. He’s— he’s alone and he’s hurt and he’s *scared*, and outside of Stanley who the police are *still not done questioning for some fucking reason*, I am the only living human being in this building that that little kid knows. This place is full of nothing but scary doctors and strangers to him, but not me! I’m his big brother’s best friend Eddie! That’s me!”

Eddie spreads his arms out, as if to say, *Look at me, can’t you tell?*

“Sir—”

“And unless you tell me that Georgie is in the middle of open-fucking-heart surgery, or he’s in immediate danger the likes of which would make it life-threatening for one single adult male to step into the room he’s in—”

“Sir—”

“— then I am not fucking leaving this spot! I’m not leaving. I’m gonna stand right here, and I’m gonna make a whole *scene*, and then maybe you’ll end up having to sedate me and drag me back into a hospital room *anyway* and—”

“Sir, if you would just—”

“— then I’ll at least be a *little fucking closer* to not having to putz around in this godforsaken waiting room anymore like some kind of —”

There’s a sound, then, behind him, the clearing of a throat that’s deliberately made loud enough to distract him from his tirade. It’s not enough to *stop* him, not really, not for more than a second when he’s this fucking heated, but then—

“Eddie?”

“Oh,” Eddie says, his eyes still on Cassy, who wrinkles her nose as if to say *bet you wish you would’ve shut up earlier, huh?*

Eddie spins around to face the doorway, and he sees, in order, tiny wide-eyed six-year-old Georgie standing by the door in a pair of little kid pajama pants and a t-shirt he’s just about *swimming* in, and then the nurse with her hand on Georgie’s shoulder, his yellow raincoat draped over her other arm.

“Georgie! Hey,” Eddie breathes, smiling like he hadn’t just spewed about a million fucking curse words in front of him without realizing it. “Hey, buddy! You okay?”

That, apparently, is all the invitation the little guy needs. His face crumples, and he dashes forward, crossing the entire width of the waiting room in the span of a few seconds, nearly slipping on his hospital-provided socks until he hits Eddie’s midsection with, it seems, the force of a fucking bulldozer.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, it’s okay,” Eddie says, nonsensically, wishing he could say just about anything else, anything more *reassuring*, but to make up for it he ducks down and hugs Georgie back as best he can. “It’s okay, you’re okay, Georgie, everything’s fine.”

“He kept asking for you,” the nurse says with an apologetic shrug, as if Eddie should be anything other than relieved that Georgie’s out here with him. And if Eddie weren’t otherwise occupied he would be so tempted to look over his shoulder and cast a quick *I told you* so look at Cassy.

But he doesn’t, because he is otherwise occupied, because Georgie’s sobbing and hiccupping and trying to talk all at once. So Eddie shushes him and extricates himself from the hug for long enough to sink down to his knees and hug him properly. Georgie clings to his neck and Eddie thinks, *Okay, I should pick him up, how heavy could a six-year-old be anyway*, and finds almost immediately that the answer to that question is *pretty goddamn heavy* as he wraps his arms around Georgie’s middle and heaves him up into the air.

He strains, and he groans, and he's pretty sure his face is turning beat red. But he adjusts.

Georgie hangs onto him too tightly for him to change his mind anyway.

Eddie meets the nurse's eyes and mouths *thank you*, to which she only offers a tight-lipped smile and deposits Georgie's raincoat and boots on a nearby cart before weaving around him to get to the front desk. Eddie knows he won't actually be allowed to *leave* here with Georgie, not until Bill gets here, whenever that will be, but that's okay. That's okay. Eddie doesn't need to leave yet.

He returns his attention to Georgie.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, what's with all the crying, huh?" Eddie asks him, like he doesn't know, rubbing his back with one hand while his other arm remains firmly under Georgie's legs. God, the poor kid's shaking like a leaf. "You're okay, buddy. Everything's okay."

Georgie just keeps crying, holding on as tight as he probably can, and somewhere in that string of gobbledygook that's coming out of his mouth Eddie definitely hears the words *scared* and *where* and *Billy*.

"Oh, no, hey, don't you worry, Billy's coming, Billy's coming," Eddie assures him, and he only grunts a little bit as he carries Georgie across the waiting room toward the nearest empty chair, where he promptly lets his legs give out underneath him so he can collapse to sitting with the kid situated in his lap. What the hell was he thinking, picking a six-year-old up like that? He literally *died* today. Jesus Christ. "You're gonna see Billy soon, buddy, I promise. He's coming. Everybody's coming, Billy and— and all the rest of his friends, too, you remember Richie?"

Between more sobs and hiccups, Georgie stammers, "Uh— Uh-huh."

"Yeah, of course you do," Eddie says, one hand on the back of the kid's head. "Course you do. Who could forget Richie? It was just the four of us back then, wasn't it? Bill and Stan and Richie and me. You never even got to meet Ben and Bev and Mike, but you'll love them."

“Y— yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. And they’ll love you, too.”

Georgie sniffles, seemingly trying to burrow himself into Eddie’s shirt, which is... probably not ideal, what with the dried blood and all. Eddie tries to half cover him with the one lapel of his jacket that’s not firmly pinned between them, realizes the jacket isn’t nearly big enough, and gives up.

“W— where’d Stanley go?”

“Oh, uh, he’s just... dealing with some boring grown up stuff. He’ll be back soon, though,” Eddie tells him, taking a deep breath to stave off his own tears. Shit, not the time, not the time. Later. Desperate for just about anything else to talk about, he adds, “And you think *we* look old, wait ‘til you see Richie. You won’t *believe* how tall he is. It’s nuts.”

“Taller ‘n you?”

“Yeah,” Eddie laughs, hugging Georgie a little tighter. “Yeah, taller than me. Your brother’s not, though. He’s still shorter than me, at least.”

“Did— did B— Billy get old, too?”

Eddie gulps. That hasn’t come up until now, and he’s... not sure how the kid’s gonna take it.

“Yeah, buddy,” Eddie admits. “He did.”

He waits for the inevitable fallout, the intensifying of the tears, but Georgie just goes quiet except for some sniffing.

“But... But he’s still your brother, you know? Still the same Bill.” And it’s true, it is. The second Eddie saw him again it all came rushing back, the quiet sincerity, the gentle nudges, that weird unexplainable quality about Bill that made them all gravitate into his orbit as kids. It was all still there, every last bit of it. “You were gone for a really long time — not your fault, not your fault at all, buddy — but, I mean, my point is, you were gone for such a long time and it doesn’t

matter. All that time didn't matter, because he still misses you so much. Every bit as much as he did back then."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely. Oh, you have no idea, he's gonna *lose* it when he sees you."

Georgie snuffles again, and Eddie allows himself a brief moment of mourning for the fact that he can't reach the tissues still in his jacket pocket. "Promise?"

Eddie nods, tilting his head to lean his uninjured cheek on Georgie's head.

"Yeah. Promise."

After everything that's happened the last few days — the killer clown from literal outer space, burying an axe in a guy's fucking skull, his whole repressed childhood coming back to kick him in the ass with vivid 1080p technicolor clarity — let's just say that the list of things that could faze Richie Tozier right now is *real* goddamn short.

He steps into the Derry Home front lobby, and he's expecting chaos. Something inhuman and terrifying wearing Eddie's face. Blood pouring from the walls. The whole damn hospital on fire. Richie goes in expecting to be forced to fight off a horrible, zombified version of Eds with that fucking spike still sticking out of his chest—

What he gets, instead, is none of that.

Yeah, he thinks, dumbly, as he stands frozen in the doorway. *Okay, yeah. That'll do it.*

Ben nearly smacks right into him from behind, catching himself at the last second and then going still just like Richie did.

“Oh, my God,” Ben breathes.

Bev comes in next, just in Richie's peripheral, covering her mouth with her hand and staring forward with her eyes blown wide. Her other hand flails for a second before gripping tight on Richie's left sleeve, like she's worried she'll keel over without the extra support — or more likely worried that he will.

And then at last there's Mike, stepping around to Richie's right, and without wasting a second he says, still breathless, “Eddie.”

Judging by the sound of his voice, he wasn't *quite* as certain as he'd sounded in the car.

But there, sitting in a hospital lobby chair like it's any old normal fuckin' day, is Eddie Kaspbrak. He looks... well, shit, he looks almost exactly how Richie saw him last, same jacket, same stupid fucking headlamp that's now half-lilted off the back of his head, same jeans soaked through with greywater, same bandage taped to his cheek where Bowers planted a knife in his face, same everything minus the blood spilling from his mouth and the gaping wound in his chest and the lifeless fucking *staring* eyes that Richie's been seeing every single time he closes his own.

Those eyes are closed now, for one thing, because he's fucking *dozing* in the hospital chair, his legs kicked out across the floor and his ankles crossed. And for another, Richie wouldn't *actually* know whether he's got a hole in his chest or not, given that the view is blocked by, of all things, a little kid taking a nap on top of him.

At the sound of his own name, though, Eddie moves. It's the barest little shift of his legs, his face scrunching up, and even that much is enough to make Richie jolt like he's been punched. Eddie blinks, once, twice, three times, and his eyes — *alive alive alive holy fucking*

shit his eyes he's alive — groggily scan over the room until they come to rest on the four of them standing in the doorway.

His whole body sags with relief.

Like *he* was worried about *them*. Christ.

“Oh,” Eddie says. “Oh, good.”

He winces as he moves to sit up, ducking his head down and whispering something to the sleeping kid on his lap, who stirs and then allows Eddie to gently move him and stand up, both of them stretching out their legs. The kid stays close to him, rubbing his fist on his face and yawning, then turning and sleepily planting his face against Eddie's thigh.

“Hey, guys,” Eddie says, smiling up at all of them, crinkles forming by his eyes.

Bev's the first to move. She takes a step forward, but Richie throws an arm out to block her path, his eyes still fixed on Eddie.

Richie gulps, his heart lodged in his throat. He's not— *entirely* sure his voice is about to work, but there have been plenty of times where that was the case and his voice came out alright anyway. “Eds,” he says, and it's a little hoarse but, whatever, he'll take it. “What was the last thing you said to me?”

Eddie blinks, a line forming between his eyebrows, and Richie can practically see the gears turning in his head, the slow turn from confusion to *wait hang on what was the last the thing I said to him* and then, finally, to a huff through his nose and a roll of his eyes.

“Okay, first of all, I'm not saying that out loud because, *hello*,” he says, and he gestures with a flat hand down at the kid still sleepily clinging to his legs, eyes widening like he just can't *believe* Richie sometimes. “Obviously. And second of all, if I was actually the... you know, if I was *It*, and *It* was pretending to be me to screw with all of you, then *It* would *also* know what the last thing I said to you was, so that's a stupid fu—” he winces, cuts himself off— “a stupid question in the first place.”

Eddie drops his hand, and for lack of anywhere better to put it, he drops it on top of the kid's head. And just like that, he loses all that steam and his shoulders slump.

"It's me," Eddie says, quieter, suddenly looking twice his age. "Guys, it... it's really me."

Bev makes a noise then, caught somewhere between a gasp and a cry, and she bats down Richie's arm and rushes across the waiting room to throw her arms around Eddie's shoulders. Richie watches as Eds freezes for a second, tenses up from head to toe, and then abruptly sinks into the hug and wraps one arm around her, his fist clenched up by her shoulder and his face buried in her neck.

The rest of them follow suit, Richie feeling like someone else is in control of his body, pulling him along on strings, until they're all gathered close in a tight circle.

"It's good to see you guys," Eddie whispers while he's still clutching Bev like a lifeline, and then he releases his hold on her. Bev doesn't step more than a foot away from him, and she cards her fingers through his hair and cups his cheek in her hand before finally breaking contact. Eddie swipes at his eyes with the back of his hand. "It's *really* good to see you guys. It's been... It's been a day."

"Bet it has," Ben says, grinning wide and his eyes shining, his hand on Eddie's shoulder.

Richie — again, when did he lose control of his arms and legs, because he definitely is not in control of any of that right now — reaches out until one hand lands on the side of Eddie's neck, his thumb right behind the spot where Eddie's jaw meets his ear. Eddie's *warm*, which is almost more startling than seeing him in the first place had been, and Richie can just barely feel a pulse flitting away under the heel of his palm.

And he must look like a goddamn dumbstruck *moron*, because Eddie looks up at him with something like understanding in his eyes and says, "I'm actually here, Rich. I'm actually alive."

Richie wants to make a joke about how he could just about *kiss* Eddie

right now, he really wants to, but his throat's not responding to any of his commands, like the link between his mouth and his brain has been severed clean in half.

"Eddie," Mike says, huffing a laugh and shaking his head. "How?"

"I don't know," Eddie admits. "But, uh..."

He looks down, and the movement somehow shocks Richie back into awareness so that he drops his hand like it's been burned, awkwardly and forcefully shoving them into his pockets. Eddie doesn't seem to notice, though, too concerned with the kid. *Right*, Richie thinks, *the kid, how'd I forget the random kid clinging to him like he's his dad or something?*

"I'm, uh... I'm not the only one," Eddie tells them, shooting a look up at Richie and then nodding down at the kid.

And Richie's first thought as the kid turns toward him, his first, wild, *insane* thought, is that there's a ghost standing there with its fist curled tight on Eddie's pant leg, its big wide doe eyes starting at Richie's shoes and trailing up until *Georgie Denbrough*, actual Georgie Denbrough, is staring up at him.

His second thought is, *Was Georgie always that tiny?*

All coherent thought stops there, though.

"Woah," the ghost of Georgie Denbrough says, and as he turns away from Eddie to fully face everyone, Richie gets his second or third or fourth (but who's counting) suckerpunch to the gut in the past hour, because Georgie's right arm is *gone*. It stops about halfway between his shoulder and his elbow, the stump left behind only just poking out from the sleeve of the massive "I HEART DERRY" t-shirt the kid's wearing, the skin there all mottled and scarred like it's a decades old injury.

Because it is. It *is* decades old, it must be, since Georgie's been *fucking dead* for at least that long.

"Is that you, Richie?" Georgie asks.

That startles a laugh out of him, and Richie covers his mouth with the back of his hand. Fuck, he's gonna start crying in the middle of this shitty hospital waiting room, and—

“Yeah,” he says without meaning to. “It’s me.”

Richie’s still distantly aware of the others. There’s Bev and Ben, both still primarily focused on Eds. There’s Eds, accepting hugs from both of them again even while his attention remains firmly on Georgie and Richie. Then there’s Mike, having stepped back, already on the phone trying to get a hold of Bill to stop him from getting on that plane. And Richie has no idea how Mike’s gonna explain any of this, but honestly, he doesn’t really care.

That’s not his problem right now.

“You *did* get really tall,” Georgie says, and okay, yeah, nope, Richie is *definitely* crying now.

His legs have turned into jelly, which is just fine, because he lets them give out and he sinks down, sits right there on his ass in the middle of the floor. Cold tile saps the heat from him through the seat of his jeans, but he doesn’t care, just nods up at Georgie and smiles wide.

This isn’t the clown.

This isn’t that fucking thing wearing Bill’s little brother’s face, not like it’d been all those years ago. It’s not that thing that sniffled and cried at Bill in the caves under Neibolt, kicking him where it hurt, whining *please take me home Billy I wanna go home*—

This isn’t that. Richie knows it. It’s like how Mike said in the car, he doesn’t know how he knows, he just *knows*.

“Uh, yeah, yeah, I did, bud,” Richie finally answers him. “Really grew into my looks, huh?”

Georgie nods, all unironic sincerity. “You got the same glasses.”

“Oh, what, these?” Richie asks, taking them off for a second like he forgot they were there, using the much needed opportunity to

discreetly wipe his eyes. And obviously they're not the *same* pair he wore way back when, couldn't be, but he nods anyway and puts them back on. "You bet. Had to stay on brand."

Georgie smiles at that, a tentative little smile, and just like that it all comes back. Holy shit. That's the way Georgie always smiled back then, every time Richie or any of them said something that he knew must have been a joke but he clearly didn't *quite* get.

Richie gulps. "Man, we really missed you, bud."

He opens up his arms, and Georgie dives forward.

And it's then, while Richie's hugging the stuffing out of this kid and trying to wrap his head around the fact that *Georgie's back* and *Eddie's back* and desperately struggling to get his own tears under control, that he hears a voice that makes the latter of those things *pretty* damn redundant.

"Oh, boy," comes the voice from across the waiting room, a vaguely nervous voice that Richie knows — again, doesn't know how he knows, he just *knows* — belongs to one dearly departed Stanley Uris, give or take about three decades of aging. "Gotta admit, this is not exactly how I pictured the reunion going."

Richie was wrong before, he thinks.

This is where all coherent thought stops.

Later, when he has time to adjust and things finally settle down, Mike

will remember everything that happens at the hospital in bits and pieces, like scenes cut from a movie all out of order, like snippets of speech from a tape recorder after he's listened so many times that his brain's gone fuzzy and he's forgotten exactly where to hit play if he wants to hear the part he's looking for. It's all just— well, it's a *lot*, like the last few days have been, so much that he has trouble organizing everything into a neat little timeline in his mind.

He'll remember, for instance, being properly introduced to Georgie, the small smile and the shining eyes looking up at him, eyes and a smile in which Mike swears he can see *so much* of Bill.

He'll remember a feeling like a sledgehammer to the chest upon seeing Stanley, the look in his eyes that says he knows, he *knows* Mike's been blaming himself for what happened, however necessary the call might have been. He'll remember Stan getting halfway through an *I'm sorry* before he's cut off by Mike pulling him into a near suffocating hug.

He'll remember the others, too, of course, because how could he forget them? The Losers Club of 1989, after all, are not the only people affected that day.

He'll remember kids, some of the kids that Eddie and Stan will later explain that they helped lead from the tunnels under Neibolt, running shrieking into the arms of parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, whichever relatives are still alive after all the years they've been gone.

He'll remember Don Hagerty, the poor kid he'd talked to after Its first reappearance in Derry, bursting through the hospital doors and sprinting across the lobby, hurtling over the little waiting room table and *launching* himself into the arms of a man with bruises and bandages littering his face, clutching him so tightly it looks like the hospital staff might need the jaws of life to pry them apart.

He'll remember the police, scratching their heads and having *no* idea what the hell to make of the situation they've just gotten themselves wrapped up in — especially when victims of yet more cycles began to wander in through the front doors.

Most vividly, though, he'll remember Bill stumbling out of his rental

car and up to the hospital's front lobby entrance, blue eyes wild and shining, chest heaving. He'll remember gently taking Bill by the upper arms, and Bill saying, *M— Mikey, tell me I can believe it, t— t— te— tell me it's real, you tell me that and I'll know it actually is.*

He'll remember Georgie sniffing, the first words he speaks to his brother after twenty-seven years being, *I'm sorry I lost the boat, Billy*, and he'll remember Bill, already on his knees and already crying, smiling up at him and shaking his head and saying, *No, no, no, it's okay, I should've been there to help, I'm so sorry, Georgie. I'm so, so sorry I wasn't there.*

Mike will remember all of this, and he will have a whole lot of work to do, wrapping his mind around what's happened and how to adjust to this new reality and how to find out whether they can really, truly trust it without digging deeper and finding its cause.

But for now?

For now, Bill's sat on the hospital lobby floor with his arms around his baby brother who's been dead for twenty-seven years, and he still manages to reach up and grab Mike by the wrist and tug him down to hug both of them, and then Bev kneels down to hug all three of them from Mike's right side, and then Ben's there on his left with tears in his eyes and his arms around everyone. Richie and Eddie join them just a second later, and Richie finally seems to recover from the shock of seeing Eddie again at all, because he's got one arm over Ben's back and the other pulling Eddie close to his side, his head turned and his face ducked down into Eddie's hair.

There's a moment in which none of them says anything, but then Richie sniffs and scrubs his forearm over his face and says, "Get your ass down here, Uris," and Mike lets out a stunned laugh as Stan kneels down between Ben and Bev, draped right over Mike's back.

Yeah. Later there will be work to do, facts to get straight, events to detangle from a timeline he can't keep straight in his head.

But for now, there's just this.

The Losers Club reunited at last.

After the hospital, after the caves, after Neibolt, a hot shower feels *exactly* as heavenly as Eddie would have expected it to, and then some.

The water pressure at the Derry Town House leaves a little to be desired, sure, but the water's hot, and his suitcase was right where he left it in his room, and his shampoo and conditioner and body wash and facial wash and loofah and razors and washcloths are all completely untouched. Eddie took one step into his reserved room, saw that all his things were still in order, and immediately dragged the whole case out into the hall so he could find everyone — they'd been hovering around him and Stan and Georgie like *hawks* since they left Derry Home Hospital, so it wasn't very difficult to catch them all at once — and ask whose bathroom *wasn't* also the site of his own recent stabbing, and could he use their shower, please and thank you.

Richie was the first to offer, and so Eddie dragged his case into Richie's room and straight to his bathroom without another word.

The shower is lovely and *exactly* what the doctor ordered but it is, of course, also the perfect place to think.

Which is unfortunate, given that thinking is exactly what Eddie does not want to do.

He doesn't want to think about any of it. He doesn't want to think about Pennywise. He doesn't want to think about all the years he spent without a shred of thought for the childhood he spent in Derry, doesn't want to think about how easily all the memories slotted right

back into place when he came back. He doesn't want to think about the leper or the clown or that painted lady or his mother and her gazebos or the girl at the pharmacy or Myra or—

Oh, shit. *Shit.*

Myra.

He's gonna have to go back to New York, isn't he? He's gonna have to go back to their apartment and face all of Myra's questions and—

No, he tells himself. You are not here to think. You are here to get this shit water off of you.

Think later. Shower now.

He spends about fifteen minutes or so scrubbing every inch of his body with robotic thoughtlessness, running on autopilot, and then spends another ten minutes washing his hair, rinsing it, washing it again, rinsing it, washing it, over and over and over again even though he *knows* that's bad for it. Once that's done, he spends another who-knows-how-many minutes just... doing nothing. Standing under the scalding spray, breathing in steam, waiting for any little bit of that heat to chase away the chill that's sat under his skin ever since—

Stop, stop, stop, he scolds himself, cutting off that train of thought right then and there.

He reaches his hands up to run them through his hair, back and forth, quick enough to splatter water droplets everywhere. The hotel staff here are gonna have a hell of a time cleaning the ceiling above the shower to prevent mildew from forming where the water's hit, he thinks, if there even *is* a hotel staff here.

Come to think of it, he hasn't seen anyone here at all in the entire time they've been here, has he?

Eddie suppresses a shudder at *that* fun new creepy thought, just as the shower water dips a degree or two.

Damn it. The water's still scalding hot, judging by thick steam

billowing up around him and the heat showing in angry red blotches on his skin, but it hasn't felt hot *enough* this entire time, hasn't been nearly hot enough to chase away the goosebumps or stop the shaking, and now it's only going to get colder.

He turns off the water, and wriggles his arm out through the space between the curtain and the wall to feel around for his towel, trying his best to keep as much steam trapped in the shower as possible.

For the love of God, he's already *freezing*, do they not have any working heat in this place? He abandons the towel as soon as he's reasonably dry and all but sprints through the process of digging through his bag, pulling on some boxer briefs and a pair of pajama pants and a thermal shirt and some *socks*, Jesus, could this tile be any fucking colder?

Eddie huffs a breath, shaking out his shoulders once he's fully dressed.

Yeah. Still cold. Fuck.

He pulls on a second pair of socks. That'll have to do.

He checks himself in the mirror, thinks *you look like shit*, then thinks *well yeah no shit I look like shit I did just fucking die*, and he sighs before turning away and packing his things neatly back into his bag. He considers the bag for a moment, considers the effort it would take to drag the bag all the way back to his own room, and then just leaves it where it is, stepping out into Richie's hotel room.

The room's empty, because of course it is, everyone's downstairs for a designated group meeting to discuss what the hell happened today, Richie included.

They'll be expecting Eddie down there soon, too.

And it really says something extra horrifying about the state of his mind right now that Richie's unkempt hotel bed actually looks *tempting*, complete with the duvet that probably hasn't been washed in years and its pillows that have got to be soaked in not only Richie's but a million other people's drool. Hell, at least that

disgusting duvet might be able to hold some of his goddamn *heat* in, anyway.

You're cold, you shouldn't be cold, he thinks, numbly, in his mother's voice. *Oh, God, you could be anemic or going through shock or having a heart attack, it could be hypothyroidism or sepsis or mononucleosis, Eddie* —

He is genuinely too tired to worry about it.

His eyes trail over the room, which is, predictably, a mess. The bed's unmade, Richie's suitcase is all but turned inside-out by the foot of the bed, socks are strewn across the floor, there's a pile of dirty laundry in the corner. And Eddie has the sudden vivid, blinding image of Richie's jacket— balled up, jabbed like another spike into his chest, soaked through with *so much blood*, and *hey hey heyheyhey Eds look at me come on man we're gonna get you out of here* —

God, he'd never even checked, had he? If there was a mark left behind on his chest? Did it scar? Is his skin totally unchanged, like nothing happened at all?

He's not sure which would be worse. Fuck.

Eddie shivers, then shoves that thought *way the fuck down*, and crosses his arms over his chest as he approaches Richie's suitcase and peers inside.

No bloodied, balled up jacket. But of course there isn't, God, even Richie's not that gross.

There is a sweater haphazardly dropped on top of the pile of Richie's clothes, though, and Eddie goes through about five seconds of internal debate before another shiver runs through him, and he shrugs.

Fuck it, he thinks. *I literally died today*.

By the time he gets downstairs, bleary eyed and feeling seconds away from collapsing, the rest of the Losers Club — including Stan, and including Bill but sans Georgie, who must be upstairs sleeping by now, and Eddie has a fleeting moment of absurd jealousy for the fact

that he is not in fact six years old — are all gathered around in the hotel's big common room.

“... all over the news,” Mike says, the only one of them that's standing. “No one knows what to do, it's...”

“Crazy?” Richie pipes up from the couch. “Absolutely fuckin' batshit?”

Ben raises his eyebrows, tilting his head in agreement, but before he says anything he catches sight of Eddie making his way down the stairs, and the rest of them follow his gaze to watch Eddie wind around the couch to find an open space where he can curl up and sleep for a thousand fucking years.

“Hey, there he is! Eddie Spaghetti, thanks for finally— uh,” Richie says, all that shit talking knocked right out of his voice in an instant. “Is that—? That's my sweater.”

Eddie grunts by way of agreement.

“And... the blanket from my bed? You raiding my hotel room now, Eds?”

“Shut up,” Eddie mumbles as he kicks Richie's legs aside and hops up onto the couch between him and Bev. “I'm cold.”

“You, too?” Stan asks from Richie's other side, and Eddie looks over to see that Stan's got one of the hotel duvets wrapped around his own shoulders, not just the little woven blanket but the *entire duvet*.

Eddie goes tense. He has a moment, then, a stab of panic through the center of his chest (*ha!*) that if Stan's cold too then maybe the cold isn't real cold after all, maybe they never really came back, maybe they're still—

“Hey, hey, it's okay,” Bev says, cutting through his panic, gently guiding Eddie down to lay with his head on her lap, which really takes no coaxing whatsoever. “You guys did just come back from the dead, and you spent *hours* in those caves. I'd be shocked if you *weren't* feeling a little off.”

Eddie manages to weave one arm out from beneath the blanket to point up at Bev, humming in a way that hopefully conveys something along the lines of *yes, exactly, everyone listen to Bev, she knows what she's talking about*, even though he's not sure who he's trying to convince. Then he burrows again.

"Georgie said he felt cold, too," Bill says, sitting in an armchair across from the couch with his elbows on his knees. "H— H— He's up there with a heated blanket and about three or four regular blankets now, but he still said he felt cold, right up until he fell asleep."

"That can't be a coincidence," Ben admits.

"Okay, guys, again," Richie says. "They all *literally* just came back from the fuckin' dead. That's not exactly an everyday kind of thing."

"But not an *uncommon* one, either," Mike says, "not anymore, apparently, not after today. The people we saw at the hospital? They were just the beginning."

"Mm. That's true, it's everybody," Eddie admits, then takes a slow breath to try and wake himself up. It doesn't work. "The, uh... the kids that died last time, not just Georgie? They were all there. Y'guys remember Hockstetter?"

"*Patrick* Hockstetter?" Ben asks.

"Mm-hmm, that's the one," Eddie nods. "So much... *smaller* than I remembered him, though. Right, Stan?"

Stan nods, tugging the duvet tighter around his shoulders.

"You guys know he was sixteen when he died? He seemed so scary at the time, but he was just..." Eddie pauses, yawns, "... just a kid, too."

"And there was Betty Ripsom," Stan quietly adds, eyes narrowed as he thinks, "and Veronica Grogan. They were with us in the caves, too."

"Mm. Yeah," Eddie agrees, closing his eyes. "Just didn't come with us to the hospital."

“And... who else, Eddie Corcorum, remember him?” Stan asks. “And Cheryl Lamonica, and Mattie Clements — we found him just after Georgie, you guys remember a *three-year-old* going missing when we were kids?”

“Vaguely?” Richie asks, shrugging. “I dunno, man, I barely remember what I had for breakfast today.”

“You didn’t have breakfast today,” Bev tells him.

“Oh, yeah.”

“The point is,” Mike says, trying to get them back on track, “it’s not just the kids that went missing this time, *or* last time. This is all over the news already. Just so far, the numbers are being reported as approaching *two hundred*.”

“Going back how far?” Ben asks.

“As far as it goes,” Mike says. “The first cycle, the first disappearances in Derry, they were in 1746. A whole community of settlers, just—” he snaps his fingers— “gone without a trace.”

“Nah, man,” Richie says. “I’m pretty sure that was Roanoke.”

“Roanoke, though similar,” Mike says, not unkindly as he points at Richie, in the *hey good job making the connection kiddo* kind of way, “is actually known about. It’s talked about. It’s taught in elementary schools. The first Derry settlers disappearing is barely spoken of even by historians *specializing* in Derry.”

“There are historians that specialize in fuckin’ *Derry*? Like, *willingly*?”

“Yes, Richie,” Mike sighs. “And that original disappearance was an entire town, every single person, three hundred or so in one day just... *gone*, and some of *those* guys are showing up now. You know what that means?”

“There’s going to be a lot more,” Bill says.

“A *lot* more,” Mike says. “We’re talking *thousands*.”

“Shit,” Richie breathes, sagging back into his seat.

“Because we killed It,” Bev says. She starts carding her fingers through Eddie’s hair like she did back at the hospital, except this time she keeps doing it, nails lightly scraping over his scalp, seemingly unbothered by the fact that his hair’s still damp from the shower, and Eddie knows there’s absolutely no chance he’s staying awake for the rest of this. “This is happening because we killed Pennywise.”

“What, like... a consolation prize for all that fucked up shit It threw at us?” Richie asks. “A nice little ‘thank you’ in exchange for slaying the beast?”

“Could be,” Ben says, nodding.

“*Could* be—? That was sarcasm, Haystack, my left *asscheek* it could be,” Richie borderline shouts. “From fuckin’ *who*?”

“Shh,” Eddie hisses, kicking at Richie’s thigh. “Georgie’s sleeping.”

“Yeah, I’m not being that loud, and seriously, Eds? The feet? Ugh, come on,” Richie complains, shoving his feet away, but Eddie stubbornly lifts them back up.

“Wearing two pairs of socks,” Eddie murmurs, eyes still closed.

“Still, dude. *Gross*.”

Richie doesn’t make any further complaint, though, just heaves a sigh and lets Eddie’s legs stay right where they are, kicked over his lap. His hand comes to rest on Eddie’s ankle, and through some combination of Bev still playing with his hair and Richie’s thumb moving back and forth over his ankle and the barest little hint of warmth that he’s managed to trap under all his layers, Eddie can’t physically hold off sleep any longer.

He doesn’t see Bev rolling her eyes and smiling at them. He doesn’t see Stan shooting a knowing look at Richie and mouthing, *Wow, still?* Nor does he see Richie flushing a deep red and elbowing Stan in the gut, just hard enough to shut him up, not hard enough to hurt. He doesn’t see Bill getting up to sprint up the stairs and check on Georgie, either, like he’s worried his little brother will disappear

again if he's out of his sight for too long. He doesn't see Mike and Ben ducking their heads together, discussing what could have *possibly* caused the crazy events that have led Eddie and Stan onto this couch, discussing what they should do now.

Eddie doesn't see any of that, doesn't hear any of it, and he doesn't much care to.

After all, he thinks he might know — or at least, have some nebulous idea — what caused it, and at least in this moment, surrounded by people he loves and who love him, it doesn't feel like something he should question.

Eddie Kaspbrak dreams.

He's somewhere far away from Derry, far away from New York. Far away from Earth, maybe, for all he knows. It's somewhere tropical, warm, somewhere Eddie's never been before. And he's swimming in the ocean, something he's *certainly* never done before, swimming in crystal clear water without ever needing to come up for air.

And all around him, on all sides, above and below, hundreds of sea turtles swim through that water, too. Sun beams glitter as they pass between the turtles' shells, their heads, their tails, their fins. They move lazily and happily in the manner of creatures with no schedule, no pressing matters to attend to, no worry in the world. And Eddie does, too.

Eddie Kaspbrak dreams, and Eddie Kaspbrak lives.

Notes for the Chapter:

me @ me: mike's part is a perfect place to end this chapter! the losers reunited at last!

also me: but... but e ddie söf te...

please come yell with me on [tumblr](#) about these idiots, since i saw It Chapter 2 my life has not known peace

2. i recall all of the days i've cried

Notes for the Chapter:

who's surprised i extended this a full chapter from my original plan, huh? show of hands

anyway y'all ready for some PINING? this chapter's heavy on the richie POV so like, you better be

warnings for this chapter:

- a brief discussion of stan's death, not graphic but if you still want to skip, skip from stan saying "I really, really do" and then ctrl + f "He downs the rest of the glass in one gulp" and continue from there, it's like three-ish paragraphs
- internalized homophobia, given that, you know, richie's in this
- brief allusions to domestic abuse and a sprinkling of abuse denial from eddie

"I don't know if I should go back to Atlanta."

Richie had been in the midst of pouring himself a nice glass of... whatever this is, the amber stuff sloshing around in an unlabeled bottle he found under the hotel bar, watching bubbles glug up the neck as he pours, but when his brain belatedly processes that sentence he fumbles with the bottle and nearly fucking drops it.

"Shit, shit, shit—!"

He grabs onto it with both hands, setting it down with exaggerated gentleness, and then turns to direct a pointed look at Stan.

"Uh. *What?*"

Stan's sitting with his back to the bar, the hotel duvet he'd stolen from Ben's room now bunched up all around his legs, the whole thing big enough that it trails down the length of the bar stool to spill over

onto the floor. A glass of scotch sits nestled between his knees, nearly drowning in that King-sized sea of beige, but he hasn't really touched it yet.

"Hey," Richie says when Stan keeps staring down at his hands, and he snaps his fingers in front of Stan's face. "Fuckface. Over here."

Stan rolls his eyes, but he does shoot a look at Richie, which is hell of a lot better than a thousand-yard-stare at his fucking knees.

"Care to run that by me again, pumpkin?"

"I said," Stan repeats with mock patience, "I don't know if I should go back to Atlanta."

"And what? Stay here?" Richie asks. "In fuckin' *Derry*?"

Stanley only shrugs. "Derry's not so bad."

"No, Eddie's mom's not so bad," Richie says, pointing at him with the hand holding his glass, and Stan snorts and rolls his eyes again. "*Derry* is a massive pile of fuckin' shit, clown or no clown. Come on, you know that. And don't you have like... I dunno, a whole life at home? I mean, I'm sure accounting is only like the *second* most boring job on the planet next to risk assessing, but what, you don't want to get back to that anyway?"

"I doubt I still have a job, Richie."

On pure reflex Richie starts to argue, but then he realizes Stan's probably right about that much. The whole dying thing probably puts a damper on one's employment prospects. "Yeah, alright, sure, I'll give you that." He lifts his glass for a sip, finds out that whatever he poured into it is probably whiskey but burns like fucking jet fuel, and after holding his breath for a second to avoid wincing he asks, "What about your wife, though?"

For a while, Stan's a *little* too quiet for comfort, staring down at his untouched glass again.

And maybe someone else would be a little more tactful about it, sure, but fuck it, Richie's not about to beat around the bush here. Not

about something like this.

“Do you *not* want to go back to your wife?”

“No, I—” Stan starts, cuts off, and sighs heavily through his nose. “I do. I really, really do.”

There’s one thing Richie can tell right away just looking at him, and it’s that Stan means it, means it with every fiber of his being. “So...?”

Stan bites his lip for a second. “Patty, she... She’s the one that found me, Richie,” Stan says, quiet as anything, and— oh, okay, shit, this is so not the direction he thought the conversation was going. Richie takes another long sip of the maybe-whiskey maybe-jet-fuel and lets it scorch his throat all the way down, but that doesn’t quite help knock any sort of good response into his brain. Doesn’t quite silence the sound of Stan’s wife crying through Bev’s cell phone.

In any case, he doesn’t need to say anything, because Stan’s not done.

“I couldn’t really think of how to avoid that. I mean, it was only the two of us in that house, and...” Stan trails off, shakes his head, and finally takes a sip of his own drink. “No, that’s— that’s a lie, it wasn’t that I couldn’t think of how to avoid it, I wasn’t... I wasn’t thinking at all, not of her, not at the time. And now that I’m back, I can’t— I can’t *stop* thinking of her, and what it must have done to her, and what it would do to her if she saw me again.”

He downs the rest of the glass in one gulp.

Then, quieter, watching the glass turn over in his hands, Stan adds, “I mean, maybe it would be... kinder, I guess, to leave her be and let her move on without me.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m not saying I’m definitely not going back, Rich,” Stan clarifies. “I’m saying I have a choice to make here, and I can’t make it lightly. I mean, we don’t even know if this is permanent, or—”

“Woah, woah, woah, *woah*, okay, I’m gonna stop you right there. The fuck you mean we don’t know if it’s permanent? Why the fuck

wouldn't it be permanent?"

"We don't know," Stan repeats, shrugging. "And I don't know about the rest of them, but I definitely still feel like death frozen over."

"Oh, fuck that, man. Relax, you're not dying," Richie tells him. "No take-backs. This is our reward for killing that thing, right? Our thank you gift for slaying the beast, and fuck off, we're not giving it back. No returns, no exchanges. Nada."

A smirk breaks through that troubled look on Stan's face. "What, all of a sudden you believe that now? What happened to your left asscheek?"

"Haven't quite scrubbed your mother's lipstick off of it yet, but otherwise it's doing just fine, thanks for asking," Richie says, winking at Stan over the rim of his glass, which does successfully draw another half-laugh out of him, even if it comes with his third eye roll of the past ten or fifteen minutes.

"Beep, beep, dickhead."

"Yeah, yeah, screw you, too," Richie says without any venom, downing the rest of his drink. He's starting to think it actually is jet fuel that he's gone and willingly put in his body but, eh, whatever. He could do worse. He has done worse.

And it's right around then, as Richie's leaning over the bar to reach for the unlabeled bottle again and Stanley plunks his own glass on the bartop in the universal signal for *fill me up, too*, that they hear footsteps padding into the bar from the doorway that leads into the hotel's big common area.

The two of them turn to look, and there's Eddie, standing in the doorway in his flannel PJ pants and socks (two pairs, apparently), stifling a yawn with the back of his hand. He's still got Richie's sweater on, the too-long sleeves pulled down to cover his hands like mittens as he tugs the little woven blanket — also Richie's, thanks, even if it technically belongs to the hotel — more securely around his shoulders.

Richie lets his butt fall back onto the stool, the bottle of jet fuel forgotten.

“Howdy, Eds.”

“Ngh,” Eddie says, squinting like the low light of the bar is really too much for him, and his hair’s standing up every which way from Bev playing with it while he dozed straight through their whole *what the fuck is going on and what do we do about it* meeting.

“M goin’ to bed. Like...” Eddie squints again, looks up, thinking. “Actual bed. Not a couch.”

Richie raises an eyebrow. “Sure you can make it up there on your own, kiddo?”

“Fuck you,” Eddie tries to say, but it’s interrupted midway through with a yawn that he doesn’t bother covering. “Mm. Keepin’ this, by the way. ‘M still cold.”

By *this* Richie doesn’t know whether he’s referring to the sweater or the blanket, but it’s pretty clear he has no intention of giving up either, and out of fucking nowhere Richie’s heart does a funny stuttering thing in his chest. “That’s—” Richie starts to say, and his voice comes out *way* too high-pitched, holy shit, so he clears his throat and tries again. “Yep. That’s... fine. Great. You do you, Eddie Spaghetti.”

“Don’t fuckin’ call me that,” Eddie murmurs, yawning again. “Night, Stanley. Good to have you back.”

“You too, man,” Stan calls after him as Eddie turns away, padding across the hotel’s shitty old moth-eaten carpet all the way to the staircase.

Both of them watch him leave; he’s the last one to have left the main common room, everyone else having already gone to bed by now and no one having had the heart to wake Eds up as they left. Once the bar is empty again save for the two of them, Stan lets out a low whistle, shaking his head as he twists back around in his seat to shoot a sideways glance at Richie.

“Shut up,” Richie says, rolling his eyes and pulling the bottle toward them again.

“I’m just saying—”

“Yeah, just *don’t* say, how ‘bout that?” Richie asks, pouring Stan’s drink first. “How ‘bout you *don’t* say. And wipe that shit-eating grin off your face while you’re at it, too.”

Stan doesn’t, of course, wipe that shit-eating grin off his face. He purses his lips for a second, and then the look is right back where it started. “Uh-huh, whatever you say, Trashmouth,” he says, taking a sip from the glass of jet fuel and doing a much better job of holding a straight face for *that*, so clearly he’s fucking capable of it. Then he rolls the bottom of the glass around on the bartop, biding his time while Richie pours his own drink, and he asks, “But, like... still?”

“Yes, still. Fuck off.”

Richie shoves the cork back in the bottle with a little more force than necessary, then gulps down about three-quarters of his drink in one go.

Stan says, “It’s been twenty-seven *years*, dude.”

“Okay, and we all forgot about each other between now and then, didn’t we? Not like I was in my fuckin’ thirties drawing little hearts in a notebook. And look, he—” Richie cuts himself off, not really sure where he was going with that one. Somewhere between *he’s super fucking married so it doesn’t matter, Mr. Urine, kindly fuck off now, and he died horribly right in front of my face and I’m not totally sure I’ve recovered from the shock of finding out he’s alive yet so excuse the fuck out of me if I get a little flustered every once in a while.*

But then it hits him that this is the first time he’s talked about it like this, the first time it’s been even a *possible* subject of conversation, in literal decades, and suddenly Richie loses all of his steam. He plunks the glass back on the bartop and finds himself staring straight ahead, straight through the racks of booze that the losers are swiftly draining bottle by bottle, and seeing just about none of it.

Stan was the only one that knew.

Stan's the only one that *knows*.

Christ, he'd forgotten that, too, hadn't he?

"Rich? You good?"

"Yeah," Richie answers right away, clearing his throat. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm, uh... I'm good." He cracks a smile and gestures at Stan with his glass, like he's toasting him. "Stan the Man, you are *kind of* a major pain in the ass sometimes, you know that?"

Stan makes a face. "Sure, yeah, *I'm* the major pain in the ass. Okay."

Richie nods, biting on the inside of his cheek to stop himself from either smiling like a lunatic or crying for about the millionth time today, both of which he may or may not already be doing anyway, and then he sets the glass down — it's basically fuckin' empty again, why does he keep picking it back up — and reaches across the gap separating them to pull Stan in for a hug.

It's not the *most* coordinated of hugs, but it's not the worst, either, given that they were kind of turned toward each other already anyway, and the bar stools are right around the same height. Stan seems to have seen it coming, too, since he lets out a sigh that's all good natured I-can't-believe-you're-such-a-sap and returns the hug with his arms tight around Richie's waist. The glass Stan's still holding is cold as shit and digging into Richie's back, but Richie doesn't care. It's fine.

"You okay, Trashmouth?" Stan mutters into his shoulder.

"Right as rain, Stanley Urine," Richie answers, but even he can hear that his voice is a dead giveaway that he's not.

"Hey, look, I'm s—"

"*Stop*," Richie interrupts. "Stop... fuckin' apologizing, okay?"

There's a second of silence, and then a subdued, "Okay," as Stan rubs his back with his free hand, but he doesn't let go. He actually holds

on tighter, like he's the one that needed this hug in the first place. Maybe he was. "Okay."

"And don't stay in Derry, either, dipshit," Richie adds, and Stan huffs a laugh at that and gives him another squeeze. "I'm serious, man. Go to Atlanta. It's not..." Richie pauses, sighs, and thunks his forehead down onto his own forearm so he's speaking into Stan's shoulder. "It's not fuckin' *kinder* to make her keep living without you, okay? Trust me."

Stan's gonna go to Atlanta.

He won't be able to board a flight, what with the whole "technically being dead" thing, but this morning, in the midst of their debating back and forth on how they're gonna get him there — from renting a car in someone else's name to possibly chartering a *literal private jet*, Christ, thanks Haystack — Eddie got up out of nowhere and crossed the room and put his own keys in Stanley's hand, surprising the hell out of just about everyone.

"Sorry about the dent in the passenger side, but the tank's full, and it's had its oil changed religiously every 3000 miles since I got it, so..." Eddie shrugged. "It'll get you there, at least."

Stan looked at him for a second, apparently at a loss for words, and finally he said, "I can't take your *car*, man."

"You're not *taking* my car, I'm lending it to you," Eddie told him. "I mean, how else am I supposed to guarantee you're coming back?"

Stan frowned, brows pinching in the middle. "I'm coming back, Eddie. I am."

"Yeah, no shit. I know you are, which is why you can take my car. Just... you know, bring it back in one piece, alright?"

And so Stan plans to leave at the crack of dawn tomorrow. He's gonna drive Eddie's big old dented Escalade down the long winding road that leads out to Bangor and, eventually, twenty straight mind-numbing hours on I-95. Richie's gonna set his alarm and roll out of bed and chug two or three cups of coffee, all so he can give Stan another hug and see him off, because that's what you do when one of your best friends comes back from the dead and has to drive a thousand-some-odd miles away two days later.

But that's not until tomorrow.

Today, the sun's already set on Derry, and all seven members of the Losers Club are gathered either on or around Bill's bed in the Derry Town House, going to town on a bunch of pizza and greasy fried foods and a case of beer. Bill's sat with his back to the headboard and with Georgie's head on his lap — the kid's long since passed out, swaddled in a blanket like a very large comfy caterpillar, his cheeks splattered with pizza sauce and his mouth hanging wide open. He'd fallen asleep to the sound of his big brother and all his big brother's friends going back and forth, talking and talking and talking.

They started off just trying to wrap their heads around the craziness in town. Then, quickly growing bored of that outside of being able to say *I know, it's crazy, man*, they all switched over to catching up on everything that's happened with each other for the last few decades.

And eventually, once they were certain Georgie was fully asleep, and then a solid half an hour or so after that just to be sure, they started catching Stan up on everything that happened after he died, how they finally got rid of that fucking clown for good.

"Why the hell— my *shower cap*?"

"Yes, asshole," Eddie rolls his eyes. He's back against the headboard, too, on the other side of Georgie. He gestures at Stan with his beer

can and asks, “What, you think you could’ve come up with anything better?”

Stanley snorts, sitting cross-legged on the foot of the bed. His cheeks are a little flushed; he’s pounded through three or four of those beers already. He did *that* because of the nerves, Richie can tell, for what he’s gonna face in the morning, but for now he’s happy and buzzed and smiling, carefree like the rest of them.

“I just,” he shakes his head, “I can’t get over you guys trying to kill an Eldritch maneater from outer space with a *shower cap*.”

“Oh, now, you think that’s bad,” Bev says, grinning wide from where she’s lying back on the floor, her head on a pillow in Ben’s lap and her toes shoved under Richie’s thigh. “Rich, tell Stanley what you called It.”

Richie cocks his head to the side, making a face. “What, a fuckin’ clown? That’s what it was.”

“No, no!” she laughs, lightly kicking him in the arm. “God, not that.”

Mike, with his arms folded on the bed and his chin resting on top of them, says, “She’s talking about before that, Richie.”

“Wha—? Oh, right, right, yeah, that’s right, a sloppy bitch.”

“Ten story tall clown monster on the body of a giant spider,” Mike says, grinning, “and Richie calls the thing a sloppy bitch right to its face.”

“Moron,” Eddie sighs.

Stan shrugs. “Yeah, that tracks.”

“Just bringing a little levity to the situation,” Bill says, winking. “Isn’t that right, Richie?”

“Exactly, thank you!”

“He’s making fun of you, dipshit,” Eddie says, shaking his head. “God, I *forgot* that shit. Stanley, he pretended to be that clown when

we were in the clubhouse, did that fucked up spot-on voice thing he does, scared the piss out of all of us, I can't believe—”

“Now, speak for yourself, Eds, I think everyone else held their fluids just fine—”

“Oh, fuuuuck you!”

“Boys, please,” Bev interrupts. “Settle down, you're both pretty.”

“But really,” Stan says, bringing them back around. “A shower cap? I mean, how'd you even remember which one was mine?”

“Uh,” Richie shrugs. “We didn't?”

“We didn't have to,” Ben speaks up. He's got one hand laced together with Bev's, and with the other he's spinning a lock of her hair between his fingers without, apparently, knowing he's doing it, but his eyes are on Stan.

Eddie nods, now with that lopsided sort of sad smile on his face as he looks at Stan, too. “Yeah, you were the one that brought them down there for all of us, remember? Wouldn't have mattered if it was technically mine or Bill's or anybody else's, it was still something from you.”

“... Oh,” Stan says, in that low contemplative tone that Richie's learned means he's thinking about, once again, apologizing for not having been there. Apparently he manages to swallow back the urge this time, though, his eyes downcast on the beer can he's cradling in both hands. “Right. Yeah.”

And that, naturally, leads them all conveniently and directly into a conversation about where they each ended up going during their bullshit mission to find tokens, to remember all the shit they forgot from that summer.

Richie promptly chugs the remainder of his beer.

He would rather not think about it, about any of it, much less fucking *talk* about it. The fucking clown, the funeral posting with his face plastered right on it, that shitty arcade and the Paul Bunyan statue

nearly flattening him like a pancake and Henry Bowers' stupid fucking cousin and—

Yeah, no, that last one's definitely a memory he could have dealt just fine without.

Everything else was all objectively horrifying nightmare fuel, sure, yeah, but that one? That one was just *fucking embarrassing*, and he'd much rather have kept that one in the good old repression pile, thanks.

When he comes back to the present, he finds the others are talking about how Bill's bike somehow ended up in an old antique shop on Canal Street, and Richie only half pays attention. He leans over as far as he can toward the case of beer by the nightstand, stretching and scrabbling at the edge of the cardboard until he hooks a finger on the box and pulls it close enough that he can snag another can out of it.

He rolls the can over in his hands as he leans back against the wall, thinking.

Maybe now, he thinks.

Maybe now he could—

He flinches away from the thought, can't even really finish it. It's an old instinct, an animal in his chest that lifts its head and sniffs the air, slithering through the spaces in his ribs and constricting his lungs, an old familiar voice that says, *No, no, don't you say that. Don't even think it, Richie, because maybe if you don't think about it for long enough then it'll go away all on its own.*

And it almost did. Or he thought it did, he really thought it went away. Thought it vanished right along with everything else from Derry, gone to some dark far-off corner of his brain, buried so deep he'd mostly forgotten it had ever been there in the first place.

Richie Tozier just wasn't that big on relationships, he'd told himself for twenty-some-odd years.

Richie was better off on his own, better off limiting his bedroom interactions to the occasional hook-up, the quickest little one-night-

stands without the slightest hint of actual intimacy. With enough alcohol he could ignore the strange *off-ness* of it, could sort of forget himself in the moment, and he'd find that it was almost somewhat enjoyable by the end. Yes, lovely, orgasms all around, thank you for your time, now please vacate the premises if you would be so kind, and no, no, don't call us, we'll call you.

Because that was fine. Intimacy issues were fine. Everyone has intimacy issues. Right?

It's just that not everyone's—

“Rich?”

He blinks out of his reverie at the sound of Bill's voice, blinks and then looks down to find that he's been fiddling with the tab on his beer can for who knows how long without ever actually opening it, blinks again and then looks up to find that everyone in the room is staring at him.

And with all their eyes on him, there's a moment, just a moment, in which a reflexive paranoid fear grips at him, a fear that they somehow all know exactly what he's been thinking.

The fear that they *know*, because of course they fucking know, how could they not—

Wouldn't want anyone to know what you're hiding, would you, Richie?

“Hey,” Bev says, quiet, nudging his arm with her knee. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Richie says on instinct, but it comes out too shaky and he knows his smile is half a mile off. “Yeah, good, just— you know, remembering shit.”

There's a gentle ripple through the room, the sad smiles and nods from every last one of them. Not the kind of knowing that Richie's afraid of, the kind that's *understanding*. And of course it is, of course none of them would blame him for zoning out and looking like he's seen a fucking ghost, it happens to all of them, because they've all been to hell and back the last few days.

But they think it's just the regular clown shit, the Pennywise shit, when it's *not*, and suddenly it occurs to Richie that this might be his last chance for a long, long while. It might be the last time in the foreseeable future that all seven of them will be together like this, might be the last time he's able to rip the bandaid off, the last time he'll be able to say it once and only once and never have to say it again. Who knows how long Stanley's gonna stay in Atlanta before he visits again? Who knows how much time they have before Eds goes back home to his wife, before Bill has another work thing, before—

“Actually, uh,” Richie says, and his mouth is a fucking desert but he presses on anyway, absently plucking the tab on his beer with the same rhythm as the pulse thumping in his ears. “I got— there's something...”

And of course that only makes him think of Eds, bleeding out in that fucking cave, *hey, Rich, I gotta tell you something*, and the way Richie's heart had stalled out for a few seconds.

He shakes his head, shoves that thought away, and closes his eyes, picturing instead how pathetic that fucking clown had looked as it shrunk back into the ground, whimpering and crying as they towered over it, as they made it small. He remembers the savage pleasure he'd gotten out of ripping the fucker's arm off, out of towering over it and taunting it like it taunted him, and Richie thinks:

Fuck you. These are my friends, you asshole.

“I'm, uh— I'm gay.”

There's a moment in which he refuses to open his eyes, in which he swears he'd be able to hear a pin drop, and when he finally does open them he doesn't let them land on any of them. He lets his gaze sail right on up, up up up toward the ceiling.

The ceiling's good, the ceiling's safe.

“Like, super duper gay,” he adds, since it's been all of about half a second without them saying anything, and he knows for a fact they're waiting on a punchline. They won't get one, but he wouldn't have put that past himself, so why should they? He wrinkles his nose,

squinting at a cobweb in the far corner of the room. “Figure you guys should... you know. Know. What with the whole... being my only friends in the entire world... thing.”

The first person to say anything is Mike, which Richie knows even without breaking his staring contest with the corner cobweb.

“Thanks, man.”

“Yep,” Richie blurts out, determinedly not acknowledging how quietly heartfelt Mike just sounded or he *will* start crying. “Any time, Mikey.”

Then there’s a hand on his shoulder, firm but gentle. Ben’s gone and reached across the gap between them, leaning over and reaching out for Richie, meanwhile Richie can’t even bring himself to look any of them in the eye. The touch is... grounding, though, which is nice. Richie allows himself to release the breath he’d been holding, feels the tension wear off vertebra by vertebra as his lungs deflate.

“Yeah,” Richie says, finally opening his beer with a satisfying *pop*. Ben gives him one last squeeze and lets go. “So. There’s that.”

Bev’s voice is low when she says, “Oh, Richie—”

“Now, don’t get all sappy on me, Ringwald,” Richie interrupts, cracking a smile that almost feels natural, *almost* free of tension. “Cause now that that’s out in the open, you and me are officially in competition.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Yep. I’m telling you, you go and fuck any of—” he waves vaguely at her and Ben— “this up, then that boy is *mine*. I’m calling it now, I got dibs.”

She laughs at that, full-bodied and happy in a way that’s amplified even more by the fact that she’s lying down, and the sound of her laughter finally quiets the creature in Richie’s chest to the point that he can properly breathe again, the familiar warmth that always comes with making his friends laugh settling there instead.

“Well,” she says, biting her lip and doing a terrible job of acting serious. “There’s no reason we couldn’t share.”

Ben blinks at that, his eyes going comically wide, and Richie almost laughs out loud, too.

“Now, you know better than that, Miss Marsh! There is not nearly enough of Haystack to go around, not anymore!”

And just like that, they’re back to the joking, back to the laughing and the teasing and the easy half-assed flirting. No one seems upset or angry, not a single one of them, though he knows it’ll take a while to fully extinguish that voice telling him that some of them might be upset, some of them might be angry, they’re just too nice to say so or too afraid to be a dissenting voice when the majority of the group is A-O-fuckin’-K with it.

For now that voice is not quite gone but it’s *quiet*, and everyone’s all smiles — including Eddie, Richie notices, the one and only time Richie gathers the nerve to so much as glance in his direction. Their eyes meet for about zero-point-three seconds, Eddie offers a small smile, and Richie immediately pounds the rest of his beer and looks away.

It feels a bit anticlimactic, but you know what?

Richie is perfectly fine with that.

It is well past midnight when Eddie finally forces himself to knock on Richie’s door.

He knocks softly, acutely aware of the fact that the rest of the Town House must be sleeping — he'd been one of the last to leave Bill's room, after all, the very last aside from Mike — and when no answer's forthcoming, he knocks a tiny bit louder.

There's a muffled sort of groan from the other side, which Eddie chooses to interpret as a *who's there*, even if it was probably intended as more of a *fuck off*.

"Richie, it's me. Open up."

The groan, which Richie had been theatrically drawing out like being woken up at this time of night is actual, literal torture, cuts off. There's the squeak of mattress springs, then the sound of Richie fumbling around like a bull in a china shop on his way to the door — he definitely falls over at least once, and there's a muffled *fuck shit damn it fuck* before his footsteps start up again — and then, finally, the click and tumble of the door being unlocked.

Richie opens the door, wearing a pair of pajama pants that he clearly just pulled on, one side of them actually pulled up over the hem of his rumpled old t-shirt. He braces one hand on the door frame and blinks at Eddie with his brow furrowed and his hair all over the place from sleep and his glasses nowhere to be seen, looking at Eddie like he's some stranger that's suddenly turned up at his door.

"Eds?"

"Yeah, no shit. Who else?"

"Uh, I dunno. You're kind of nothing but a blurry... man... shape," Richie says, waving gracelessly at Eddie's entire being, "to me right now, so." He shrugs. His voice still has that rough sleepy quality to it, until he clears his throat and adds, "Could be anybody if they're short enough."

"Yeah, *ha, ha*, asshole. Are you gonna let me in or what?"

That, for whatever reason, seems to stun Richie right out of his sleepy comfort zone into... something else. His eyes open a little bit wider, his shoulders stand just a little bit straighter, and he drops his hand

from the door frame to cross his arms over his chest. “Uh, yeah,” he answers, stepping back and allowing Eddie enough space to slip past him and into the room. “Yeah. Sure thing, Spagheds.”

“Ugh, God, do *not* make that a thing, too,” Eddie groans, rolling his eyes. He doesn’t technically need to shove past Richie — actually, Richie’s given him an almost weirdly large amount of space to let him in — but he does anyway, lightly pushing him in the shoulder on his way into the room.

Richie, oddly, doesn’t even acknowledge it.

“So not that I’m not, uh, *chuffed* and all to have you visiting in the middle of the night or anything, but what exactly are you...?”

“What I *am*,” Eddie says, already beelining for the bathroom, “is in desperate need of a shower.”

“A shower?”

“Yes, dude, a shower.” Eddie frowns, turning back toward Richie, who still hasn’t so much as budged from his awkward stance by the door, arms crossed and all. Eddie raises an eyebrow at him and pokes at his own temple, asking, “What, are you still asleep in there?”

“Right, shower,” Richie says, like he just remembered what a shower is. He scrunches up his face and shakes his head. “Your bag. In the bathroom. In my bathroom. Right, yeah.”

“Yeah, and my bathroom is... still not usable,” Eddie tells him, choosing not to dive into all the myriad irrational reasons that he can’t quite bring himself to so much as step foot inside his own room’s bathroom. “So I came here to use yours again. Is that—?” He falters, suddenly realizing Richie’s offer might have been a one time thing. “I mean, is that okay?”

“Mm-hmm,” Richie says right away. “Yep. A-OK.”

“O... kay,” Eddie says, frowning, eyeing Richie up and down. “You can, you know, go back to bed or whatever. I’ll let myself out when I’m done.”

“Sure. Yeah,” Richie says, nodding almost mechanically as he finally heads toward the bed, letting himself drop down to sit on it. “Yeah. That’s— yep. Good.” He’s stopped looking like Eddie like he’s an alien fucking species, at least, which is an improvement, but now he’s just kind of staring into space, somewhere to the left of Eddie.

He looks like he’s building up to add something else. Not a joke, Eddie can tell. He looks almost the same as he did just a few hours ago, sitting on Bill’s floor and stewing in his own anxiety as he worked up the nerve to say... what he said.

Not that it’s a big deal.

It’s not. Of course it’s not. Eddie doesn’t care, it’s twenty-sixteen for God’s sake.

But it *has* sort of... stuck, though, to his mind. Eddie can’t quite grasp why, and to be honest he doesn’t really want to know why. He would much rather not think about who Richie may or may not be sleeping with, thank you, he’d rather leave that thought well enough the fuck alone. It’s probably just all the years he’s remembering of Richie ceaselessly joking about fucking his mom, but for whatever reason, the idea of Richie going to bed with a guy (and here his mind always conjures up some stereotypical L.A. douchebag, blonde hair and a magazine-quality jawline and unrealistically toned abs), it just... It doesn’t sit right.

But that’s his problem, not Richie’s.

Jesus, he just got Richie back after all those years forgetting he existed. Eddie isn’t about to fuck that up by hurting him, much less by being that particular brand of asshole that he’d never want to be anyway, to anyone, not just to Richie.

There are plenty of jokes he could make, sure, just to cut the tension, like Richie always does. But Eddie, and the rest of the losers for that matter, have held back any smart comments, any jokes about it — even though all those jokes are *right there*, Jesus, Richie only spent their entire childhoods talking about his dick and fucking girls and all those stupid comments about Eddie’s mom. But they all must have heard it in Richie’s voice today, the fragility of it, the guarded look

on his face that said *hey I know I never say anything serious but this is basically me exposing a raw nerve to you guys so please for the love of God don't prod it or I might collapse.*

“Hey,” Eddie says, once he pulls his head out of his own ass and realizes that Richie still has yet to say anything, out loud, and they’re both just standing here stewing in their own thoughts like a couple of morons. “You okay?”

Richie opens his mouth, then shuts it. He gestures completely nonsensically with his hands in front of him, then drops them to his sides, apparently defeated. “Uh... Yeah, yeah, I’m good, Eds. Just—y’know, doing math in my head, trying to figure out how many hours of sleep I got left before I gotta be up to see Stan the Man off.”

It’s a really obvious change in subject, but whatever, it’s the middle of the night. Eddie allows it. “You’re getting up at six just to watch him leave?”

Richie shrugs, a full-body endeavor that has his palms turned up, his long arms stretching out to either side before he drops them again. “Gotta,” he says. Then some of his assholishness seems to return to him, and he winks at Eddie, the effect of which is entirely lost by how sleepy he looks. “No need to be jealous, Eddie, babe, I’ll do the same for you when you head back to the Big Apple.”

“No one calls it that, man,” Eddie automatically shoots back, even though the mere mention of him going home — something he’s done his very best not to think about for the past thirty-six hours since his return from the dead — sends a horrible shaky feeling down to the pit of his stomach and sets it to a simmer.

“Still,” Richie says, finally pulling his legs up onto the bed and lounging back. “Can’t stay in fuckin’ Derry forever, right?”

Eddie gulps. “Yeah. Guess not.”

“Mm. Couldn’t fuckin’ pay me enough,” Richie murmurs, tugging the hotel duvet over his shoulders and shimmying for a moment before he tugs his pajama pants out from underneath and tosses them without looking at the far wall. “Night, Eds.”

Within a few seconds Eddie can already hear him softly snoring, and he abruptly remembers that Richie *always* used to fucking do that, always used fall asleep the second his head hit the pillow, the lucky bastard. That memory surfaces at the exact same moment that he realizes he's been staring, and Eddie turns on his heel and hurries into the bathroom. He presses his back to the door until it gently clicks shut, sliding down the door until he's sitting, swallowing down the panic that's slowly creeping up his chest.

Can't stay in Derry forever.

Eddie takes a breath, closes his eyes, and leans his head back against the door.

"Night, Rich."

They cannot, of course, stay in Derry forever. None of them can.

But when Ben brings an alternative option the very next day, it catches Eddie by surprise.

It's officially been two days since he woke in that cave, two days since Stan and Georgie and Adrian and Vicky and Dean and Hockstetter and *everyone*, two days since the population of Derry roughly doubled in the span of a few hours. By now "The Waking" — which Eddie still maintains is a stupid fucking thing to call it — has made its way from local to national news. And judging by what Eddie's read on his phone while swathed in a million blankets in his room at the Derry Town House, most people think it's an elaborate hoax.

Hell, half of *Maine* thinks it's an elaborate hoax, people who would only need to drive a few hours or so to see the proof themselves. Even some people in *Derry*, for fuck's sake, the people surrounded by the evidence day in and day out, some of *them* still refuse to believe it.

Oh, well. Eddie figures that's about the least he can expect. Same old Derry.

The seven of them are sitting around a table at a buffet restaurant the next town over. Seven seats for seven losers, plus Georgie, seated between Bill and Richie, and minus Stan, who should be closing in on Atlanta any minute now and is probably psyching himself out for the most nerve-wracking reunion of his life (afterlife?) at this very moment.

Bill's walking Georgie over to the dessert table, Richie's just made some comment about how Ben's architectural firm is probably falling apart at the seams without him, and Ben hesitates, sets his fork down, and says:

"I've actually been thinking about staying in Maine."

The table goes silent. Eddie blinks. Bev smiles all warm and loving at Ben and leans into his shoulder, so they've clearly talked about this before. Richie does an exaggerated double take to see if Georgie's at the table, and when he confirms he's not, he leans in and asks, "Fucking *what?*"

"Uh... yeah," Ben laughs, that quiet reserved laugh that's just on the edge of nervous, and he nods. "Maybe not Derry, it's getting a little crowded in town these days, but somewhere nearby. I've been thinking about a townhouse, lots of bedrooms. Someplace big enough that... that everybody could stay there, you know? All of us, whoever wants to."

Oh, Eddie thinks.

The others catch onto his meaning pretty quickly, too.

"Is this your way of asking me to move in with you, Benny, my

dear?” Richie asks, leaning his chin on his hand and batting his eyes. “Because, ooh *honey*, all you had to do was ask.”

“All of us except for Richie,” Ben immediately adds, and Mike nearly spits out his drink, covering his mouth with a fist and choking on a laugh.

“Oh, I like that idea,” Bev says, grinning wide.

Mike nods, wiping his face with a napkin. “Sounds great to me.”

Richie leans back in his seat and flips them all off with both hands, but he’s smiling a little, too, and before he can make some smartass comment, Georgie wanders back to the table with a chocolate ice cream cone in his hand — and all over his face — and Bill trailing right behind him.

Mike gives a nice theatrical gasp, placing one hand on his chest and everything, and he says, “Georgie, Richie just *curled* at us, would you believe it? We’re gonna have to make a swear jar or something at this rate.”

“That’s a lie,” Richie insists, pointing at Mike. “That is a bold faced lie, Michael, lies and slander! I have never said one curse word, one time, ever, in my entire life.”

Georgie pauses in licking around the bottom of his cone and says, “I didn’t hear him say anything.”

“He put his middle finger up,” Bev explains, the way Eddie’s noticed she always does when Georgie doesn’t understand something, anything, even with the things most adults would shrug off with a *you’ll understand when you’re older*, or *because I said so*. “That’s a sign for a really bad word.”

Georgie wrinkles his nose. “That sounds dumb.”

“That’s ‘cause it is, they’re totally making that up,” Richie says, one arm draped over the chair Georgie’s hopping up into now. “This—” he holds up a middle finger, literally flipping off the six-year-old, Jesus Christ, Richie— “just means *I love you* in sign language, kiddo.”

"Beep, beep," Eddie mutters, just as Bill reaches around Georgie's chair to smack Richie on the back of the head.

"Ow! Assault!"

"Wait!" Georgie shouts, cutting off their arguing. "I thought I already knew *I love you* in sign language, I thought it was..." he looks down at his ice cream, evidently deep in thought for a moment, and then without another word he shoves the entire thing into his mouth to free up his hand. He holds up his pinky and forefinger and thumb, his middle and ring finger tucked in, the entire hand coated in a sticky layer of chocolate. Then, around the mouthful of ice cream, he tries to say *like this*, but it comes out more like *why dish*.

The entire table breaks. Everyone's laughing now, even Eddie can't help it. Mike folds his forearms on the table and drops his head onto them, shoulders shaking.

Richie's already red in the face, laughing the kind of silent can't-catch-his-breath laugh that only comes out once in a blue moon. He takes off his glasses to wipe tears from the corners of his eyes, and he wheezes, "Oh, that's — yeah, that's another way to say it, kiddo."

"Why would there be more than one?"

"I dunno, why not?" Richie shrugs.

"Richie, Jesus, you can't tell him that," Bill sighs, though he's still smiling, too. "H— He's gonna start flipping off everybody he knows."

"So what? Kid's got a lot of love to give—"

"Anyway," Bev cuts Richie off, shaking her head, "Georgie, please don't put your middle finger up at anybody, stick to the sign you just showed us. And Bill, before you came back we were just talking about how Ben's thinking of buying a townhouse nearby."

Bill blinks, first surprise, then — *oh*, Eddie thinks again, because with the way Bill grins at Ben and Bev now, Eddie just knows Bill has already heard about this, too. Surprised at the timing of the announcement, maybe, but not the content of it.

It makes sense, Eddie thinks. Ben and Bev both have jobs that can easily be worked remotely, Bev probably never wants to so much as see the Chicago skyline again lest she be reminded of her husband, maybe wants to steer clear of the entire Midwest while she's at it, and Ben's gonna go wherever Bev does. As for Bill, well... Eddie knows the situation with Bill's wife, Audra, in a sort of peripheral way. He knows what Bill's mentioned in passing, which is just *we're taking a break until things settle down*, and, well, Maine is as good a place as any to wait for that. It's supposed to be a good place to write, too, or so Eddie thinks he's heard.

Not to mention Eddie had been there, just yesterday, when Georgie asked Bill why they couldn't go back to their old house. *Another family moved in there*, Bill told him, in a valiant effort to act like it didn't break his heart to say so. *It's been a long time, Georgie.*

Packing everything up and moving Georgie all the way across the Atlantic is probably just about the last thing Bill wants to think about.

"Big enough we could all stay there," Ben says again, smiling that sweet eye-crinkling smile of his. "Long as we want to."

Richie says, "Feels like you're trying to one-up the old clubhouse, Haystack."

The eye-crinkling smile grows. "Yeah. Yeah, maybe I am."

And that's how it goes.

Ben purchases a three-story townhouse with a basement and a patio deck and a balcony just an hour's drive out of Derry, the very next day, and it's available the following day for move in. He always words it that same way, *big enough for all of us*, and never explicitly says who actually lives there aside from himself and Bev. At least not that Eddie notices — Georgie and Bill must be officially moving in, he's sure.

As for the rest of them, there's Mike, who doesn't seem to want to put a pin on whether he's staying in Maine or getting on the next flight to Florida, and so he settles into an "I'll head out when it feels right" sort of uncertainty that seems so easy and effortless to him and the mere *thought* of which sets Eddie's teeth on edge. There's also Richie, who's got his own apartment in L.A. but doesn't seem in any rush to get back to it for whatever reason, despite his self-proclaimed hatred for the entire state of Maine. And obviously Stan, who's about a thousand miles away but says he's definitely gonna make use of that spare bedroom sooner rather than later, as long as Ben and Bev don't mind him bringing along a plus one (they don't) and as long as Ben's the one cooking (he is, every day).

And Eddie...

Eddie doesn't know what to do. He keeps his suitcases packed, because surely he's heading back to New York soon, and even though he gave his car to Stanley all he really has to do is rent another one and head down I-95 and—

And he doesn't do that.

He just keeps *not doing that*.

Eddie feels sort of like a dead man walking. Which, yeah, fucking *obviously*, but it's more than that somehow.

It's five days after his death, when the number of missed calls on his phone is creeping up into the hundreds and his voicemail box has long since filled up and the anxiety feels like it's eating him alive from the inside out, that Eddie excuses himself from Ben's celebratory housewarming dinner and lets himself out onto their balcony.

He's not alone, though.

"Oh," Bev says, turning at the sound of the screen door sliding open, her big eyes twinkling in the light shining from the kitchen behind him, a cigarette perched between her lips and letting off a thin tendril of smoke. She plucks it out and holds it between her two fingers and says, "Eddie. Hey."

"Hey."

"Sorry, I can—" Bev mimes putting out the cigarette, makes to actually do so, but Eddie stops her.

"No, no, it's... fine," Eddie says, and he wants to say *I never actually had asthma, Bev*, and he wants to say *I know secondhand smoke has all kinds of potential detrimental effects to even the healthiest of people but that's all it is, potential, and even this little thing sort of feels like a bit of rebellion, you know what I mean? As pathetic as that sounds, it still kind of feels that way.*

But mostly he just finds himself thinking of Bev's ex, how she'd mentioned so offhand and casual one day that he never liked it when she smoked, and God, the last thing Eddie wants to do is take this one thing away from her.

He can't say any of that, though, so he shrugs.

"You were here first."

Bev smiles, shifts the cigarette over to the hand farthest from him, and beckons him over to the railing with her.

Eddie easily slots into the space at her right, leaning his elbows into the rail, looking out over what is officially now Ben and Bev's (and Bill and Georgie's) backyard. It's beautiful, it really is. It's a crisp night with the stars spilled out across the sky on open display, and they're far enough out from Bangor that there's a hell of a lot of them. The backyard stretches out toward a smattering of trees, and that smattering thickens into a genuine forest within a few hundred yards. Behind their backs, he knows there's a whole neighborhood and streetlights and cars driving this way and that, but standing here,

they might as well be in the middle of nowhere.

It's... peaceful. And Eddie has the bizarrely nonsensical thought that he wants nothing more, right now, than to reach out and grab all of that and shove it inside his chest so some of that peace will transfer over to him.

Can't do that, though.

Eddie gulps, takes a slow breath. "Ben sure knows how to find good real estate."

"Yeah," Bev agrees. She's holding the cigarette in her left hand, and she takes a drag from it and blows the smoke off to the left where Eddie can barely even smell it. "He really does."

"Nice of him to get such a big place, too."

Bev glances up at him out of the corner of her eye with a smile, then nudges him with her elbow. "You know you're welcome to stay as long as you like. This place, it's all of ours, like..." she sighs, wistfully, shrugging and looking out at the trees again. "Like Richie said. It's the Losers' Clubhouse 2.0."

Eddie nods, mechanically, feeling that gaping gnawing feeling in his chest swell and press up against his ribcage. "Yup. Yeah. I just, um..." He gulps again. "I have to go back, you know. To New York."

"Yeah, that's right. Your wife, you said, right?" Bev asks, eyes searching the trees like she's thinking. "Myra? Was that it?"

Again Eddie nods.

"You're probably eager to get back home, I guess."

She says it like she knows, she *knows* he's not, she's just waiting for him to say so — or maybe she doesn't say it like that, maybe he just hears it that way. Maybe he's reading too much into it. The feeling grows a little more, sends his heart into a rabbit-thump in his throat, and Eddie kind of wishes he were the one smoking, screw the laundry list of health effects, screw the black tar and the lung tumors and all of it. He just wants something to do with his hands.

"I think..." Eddie pauses, hesitates, licks his lips. "That's the thing, I'm not, really. Eager to get back home. I think— I think I'm gonna leave her when I get there."

Holy shit. He really just said that out loud.

Well, it's out there now.

"Feels weird saying that out loud," he admits, quieter.

Bev nods, slowly, then flicks a bit of ash over the rail. "Always a little different in your head, isn't it?"

She doesn't sound surprised. Eddie tries not to dwell on how fucking obvious he must be.

"Yeah," he says instead. "It is. It's, uh... been there, for a little while? In my head. At least since... you know, since the memories started coming back. I don't know, I guess I always knew, on some level, that I never really loved her, but... I always figured I loved her enough, you know? Or cared about her enough, I guess, for it not to matter. But then I get all these memories back and it's like—" he lifts his hands and shakes them, like there's a body double of himself standing in front of him and he's shaking his own shoulders to knock some sense into himself— "it's like, 'Hey, dipshit! You married your mother! You spent your teenage years hating what she was like and then married someone exactly like her! Way to go!'"

He lets out a nervous laugh without a single ounce of humor in it, and then drops his hands and leans against the rail again.

"I don't know what the hell I was thinking. Should have left forever ago, but I just... I just *didn't*. I kept staying with her because it was... easy, I guess? Because I was afraid of leaving? And I never even realized how much of a coward I was being, not until I remembered that bravery was even, like... an *option* for me."

And look what happened, Eddie. You took it one big step too far and got yourself killed for it, he thinks but doesn't say, *so what exactly was your point again?*

"Sorry," he finds himself saying. His voice comes out hoarse. "Didn't

mean to... unload all that on you.”

“Hey, come on. That’s what friends are for, Eddie,” Bev says without missing a beat, and she sounds like she means it. “And I mean, out of any of us, I can certainly empathize the most.”

Eddie blinks, nearly doing a double take, and then he remembers. Another memory, way down deep, and another one after that, and another and another and another. Little baby-faced Bev with her long sleeved shirts even in the dead of summer, *my dad’ll kill me if he finds out I had boys in the house*, and that fucking clown sneering up at her with her dad’s face and those freaky fucking eyes and *are you still my little girl, Bevvie?*

“Jesus,” he breathes before he can catch himself. “Bev, shit, I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“So did I,” Bev tells him, flicking ash off her cigarette again. “I forgot all about him, but only on the surface level, you know? Like how we forgot everything else. I still knew that he’d existed at some point, obviously, and I knew I didn’t like thinking about him, and I still had all the... effects, the marks he left behind in my brain.”

She takes a drag, slowly, then purses her lips and blows the smoke as far as it’ll go.

“And then I went and married someone exactly like he was.”

Eddie wrings his hands together, frowning down at them.

There’s something there, he thinks, something... parallel, maybe, between what he did and what Bev did. Forgetting what they went through as kids, forgetting how they’d gotten *past* all that shit as kids, and then repeating the cycle all fucking over again.

But— no, no, Myra’s not like that, he reminds himself. He might not love Myra, and she might not love him, not really, but she’s not— she was never— *he’s* not—

He ducks his head down and presses his thumbs into his temples, squeezing his eyes shut, and he forces himself to end that train of thought before it can get any further.

Pull the whole damn train off the tracks. Close the station. Do not pass Go.

Bev. They're talking about Bev, about her terrible father, who was always terrible, obviously, but there's something especially stomach-turning about looking back on it now, as an adult, remembering how small Bev was. They're talking about her terrible husband, too, her husband whom Eddie is incredibly grateful to know is separated from Bev by a couple thousand miles and a newly filed restraining order.

"Uh... well," Eddie says when he finds his voice again, lifting his head from his hands, "I'm glad you found Ben, at least."

It's true. He is really glad for that. Bev could have left her husband and enjoyed the single life and never spoke to another man again as long as she lived, and Eddie has a feeling she would have been just fine. But he's still really, really glad she found Ben.

The smile he catches out of the corner of his eye is bright, dazzling.

"Yeah," Bev says. "So am I."

She leans her head on his shoulder, and he drops his cheek on top of her head even though it's the bad cheek with the still healing stab wound under a big square Band-Aid. They stay that way for a while, just looking out at the scenery, Bev occasionally pulling from her cigarette and blowing the smoke at an angle away from his face, flicking the ash over the rail.

Eventually, though, she says, "I know your situation isn't the same as mine was, Eddie, not exactly," like she's read his mind, and Eddie barely suppresses a jolt. Bev doesn't seem to notice, or she pretends not to. "Obviously I can't know for sure, but the way you talked about her, about Myra, it sounds like she's not... a *bad* person, or at least not the kind of bad person that Tom was. But if she's not good for *you*, that's... well. We're behind you no matter what. You know that."

Eddie gulps. "Thanks, Bev."

She nods, flyaway strands of her hair tickling his neck. "And for the

record, *caring* about someone is never a bad thing, but it's not enough for a marriage. Especially not where you're concerned, Eddie, given that you care about pretty much everyone."

He wants to scoff, wants to snort a careless laugh and say, *oh, come on, not everyone*, but something's clogged up his throat to prevent him from speaking, so he doesn't.

Bev turns, snakes an arm around his waist while the other hand remains poised on the railing with the cigarette that she was never allowed to smoke until a few days ago, and Eddie mirrors her with an arm around her shoulders, pressing a kiss to the top of her head without even really thinking about it.

"I'm also very, very glad that you're back," Bev tells him, squeezing him tight.

"Yeah," Eddie murmurs into her hair. "Yeah, me, too."

Two days later, Eddie rents a car.

It's seven hours of straight highway from Bangor to Manhattan, nothing but trees and the occasional MOOSE CROSSING signs to break up the utter monotony of it, and Eddie's anxiety keeps such a stranglehold on his lungs for the whole fucking drive that the coffee in the cupholder goes completely untouched. It's one of his bad days, too, or what he's been calling his *bad days* for the week since he died, a day that's just like that first one, when he's cold all the way down to his bones and no amount of layers seem to help, like his own body isn't giving up any heat to trap. It comes and goes in waves, and

today's like a fucking tsunami.

So the drive is, for lack of another word, miserable.

But it's still not quite as bad as what awaits him at his and Myra's apartment.

It's completely expected, at least. He knows exactly how bad it's going to be, exactly what to expect when he walks in the door, so even if he's dreading every second of it, at least there are no surprises, no curveballs.

(And isn't that why he married her? The familiarity, the predictability of it?)

The thing is, Myra is a lot like his mother in a lot of ways, obviously, in ways he'd never even fully connected until recently. But she's also *unlike* his mother in just enough ways for the similarities to have always seemed forgivable, in just enough ways to make all of this *so much fucking harder*. It would be easier if she would leer over him like his mother always did, if she used her size against him, if she sneered and scowled and told him *you are not leaving this house if I have anything to say about it, Mister*.

But she doesn't. Instead of standing firm in his path, Myra trails behind him as he makes his way through the apartment, never leaving him alone for an instant. Instead of sneering, she just guilts and pesters and pokes and prods. Instead of scowling she just *cries*, because she's always known Eddie caves the quickest when it comes to tears and he hates that she's always been so goddamn right about it.

"Eddie! *Eddie*—!"

"*Myra*, seriously, you know this is for the best," Eddie says as he heads for the door, one of the last things he knows he'll ever say to the woman he was married to for sixteen years. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm — I'm sorry. I have to go."

And it's not until then, when she can see that there really is no changing his mind on this, when it's clear that the tears aren't

making him as pliant as she might have hoped, that those tears dry up and her eyes harden and the insults come out.

After all, Bev was right; Myra's not a bad person, not really, not like Tom was.

But she never claimed to be a particularly *good* one, either, and Eddie's just broken her heart as thoroughly as someone can in a relationship with as little real love as theirs had.

Eddie gets back into the rental car with two more suitcases stuffed to bursting with his belongings, one briefcase holding every bit of paperwork he'll ever need to ensure he never has to go back to that apartment again, and a horrible sense of guilt settling into the pit of his stomach like bile. Rational or not, deserved or not, it doesn't matter, because it's still *there*, and Eddie drives about an hour or two out of New York before he has to stop. He needs to.

He picks a rest stop at random off the side of the road, pulls into a parking space, drops his forehead onto the steering wheel, and he finally lets the tears come.

Alone in this little rental car in some tiny rest stop in the middle of nowhere with rain pattering down on the windshield, Eddie cries and cries and cries in great big heaving gasps until he's cried himself out.

Then, feeling sort of numb and tingly and hollowed out from his ribs down to his diaphragm, he digs around in his pockets and pulls out a pack of tissues and dries his eyes, blows his nose, tosses the tissue in the bag he's using as a road trip trash can.

He leans back in the seat and pulls his phone out of the cupholder. He means to do it just so he can finally delete all those voicemails from Myra clogging up his voicemail box — he'll need the space soon, he'll need to actually pick up the phone and actually receive voicemails when he can't pick up, since he's sure there's going to be calls from divorce lawyers in his near future — but instead he opens up the phone and sees seven missed texts.

None of them are from Myra.

He opens up the app. Six of the messages are from their Losers Club group chat, which isn't unusual at all since that chat's just about always active, usually because of Richie sending memes that absolutely no one else understands or incomprehensible strings of emojis.

The other one is from Richie alone, outside the group chat. Eddie opens that one up.

[you still alive out there in the wild wilderness of manhattan, eddie spaghetti?]

Eddie stares at the message for a second, shakes his head, then types out an answer.

[Actually in CT now.]

Richie's answer comes back within seconds.

[hm texting and driving, living life on the edge i see]

Eddie rolls his eyes, shifting the car back into drive, and without really thinking about why, he connects the phone to the rental car's bluetooth system and then taps the little call button on the texting screen as he pulls out of the rest stop.

Richie picks up on the first ring, and Eddie realizes immediately that the bluetooth was a *horrendous* idea, since Richie's voice comes blaring out of the speakers a second later:

"GHOSTBUSTAHS, WHADDAYA WANT?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Richie," Eddie sighs, shaking his head as he merges onto the highway and watches the speedometer tick up and up and up. "Just give me a heart attack while I'm driving, that's fine, why not? I've gotten a whole seven extra days out of this resurrection deal already, right? I had a good run, might as well careen off the I-84 and onto a median in... whatever town I'm in."

"No, God, Jesus," Richie says through the laughter at his own joke from a full thirty fucking seconds ago, "you already died in the second most boring state in the country, Eds, please do not try to

break that record with the first place winner.”

“You think Connecticut’s got that spot? Really?”

“Yes, really, are you kidding me? I did a show there once, so believe me, I know,” Richie tells him, and Eddie finds his brain caught on that for a second, caught on the fact that Richie was less than a three hour’s drive from him at some point in the last twenty-seven years and he’d never even known. Had Richie done shows in New York? Had they ever crossed each other’s paths? Surely they couldn’t have, Eddie thinks. Surely he would have remembered him then. Richie continues, “I literally opened up the set with, ‘I love the fact that absolutely none of you guys are from here,’ and you know what, man? I was fuckin’ right! That got more laughs than the whole rest of my show.”

“Well, that’s because your shows suck.”

“Ooh, ouch,” Richie answers, and Eddie hears some kind of rustling. Must be lying in bed, shifting around. It’s only seven at night, but then again he’s pretty sure a healthy sleep schedule is not at the top of Richie Tozier’s priority list. “Tell me how you really feel, Eds.”

“I just did, and don’t fucking call me Eds.”

“Sure thing, Eddie Spaghetti.”

He knew that one was coming, so he doesn’t bother complaining about it. Instead he asks, “So how’s the townhouse?”

“Casa de la Hanscom is lovely as always. Little quieter with our resident hypochondriac out for the day, and speaking of which, Edward, texting and driving? I thought the love of my life Mrs. K taught you better than that.”

“I wasn’t texting and driving, asshole, I was at a rest stop.”

“Oh, yeah, gotcha, so calling and driving—”

“— is far less dangerous than texting, especially when it’s hands free,” Eddie tells him, and he flicks on the blinker to switch lanes and speed around some idiot going too slow for his liking.

The conversation continues easily from there.

Richie, immediately upon being told that his voice is blaring through Eddie's car speakers, puts on his best impression of an old timey radio announcer (which is unsurprisingly spot fucking on) and narrates everything he's doing and then everything Eddie missed at the townhouse today.

They don't talk about why Eddie went to New York — he never told any of them, aside from that brief conversation with Bev, but he imagines most of them have probably inferred it, what with him making the whole trip there-and-back in one goddamn day — and they don't talk about man-eating clowns or the legal and logistical nightmare that Derry has become in the last few days. They don't talk about Myra or where Eddie's going to be living now or what the future holds for him, which is good, because any of that might be liable to send him into a full blown panic attack.

They just... talk. And with every joke Richie makes at his expense, every begrudging smile that Richie luckily cannot see, and every mile that Eddie puts between himself and New York, the horrible vice grip on his lungs gradually lets up.

He feels lighter, *really* lighter, for the first time in...

Well. Probably the first time in twenty-seven years, give or take.

"It's like — like fuckin' Jaws, you know?"

"Is it?"

Richie nods even though Ben's back is to him, and he rolls the bottom of his coffee mug around on the island countertop, tapping his heels against the stool's bottom rung. "Yeah. Totally. Big monster killing and eating people, killing and eating *kids*, and we were the... y'know, the fisherman guys! The captain dude with the harpoon! Ahab, or— I don't know, I've never... I've never actually seen Jaws." Richie lets the mug sit flat against the countertop. "Shit. Maybe it's a bad metaphor."

Ben laughs as he pulls a steaming kettle off the stove. "No, I see what you're getting at, I think."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Ben shrugs, turning toward the island and placing the kettle down on a potholder. He's got a big old assortment of ingredients on the island, too — or at least, more than Richie ever has when he's making himself something, which usually amounts to either one frozen box in the microwave or an order to the sushi place down the street from his apartment in L.A. "Like you said before, we slayed the beast. It was horrifying, for sure, and there's a lot of things we'll never understand about It, let alone what came after, but... in the end It was just one thing. A big bad monster that we had to defeat."

"Yeah. Exactly," Richie says, taking another sip of his coffee and then pointing at Ben with it. "And the guys in Jaws, I mean, once they killed the fuckin' shark that was it, right? It was over?"

"Well." Ben pulls out a knife and starts chopping up... a root? Is that a root? Richie thinks it's a root. "There were sequels to Jaws."

"But they were just more sharks. Or... I mean, probably, I didn't see the sequels, either. Did you?"

"Can't say I did."

Richie squints, wrinkling his nose. "Should we watch those movies?"

Ben laughs again, shaking his head. "If you want, man."

"That— Okay, wait, no, I'm way off track. My *point* is," Richie says, gesturing at Ben with his mug and trying to relocate where exactly

his point was, “that... I mean, once you kill the beast that’s usually where the story ends, isn’t it? There’s not supposed to be some crazy... hundreds-of-people-brought-back-from-colonial-fucking-times bullshit, right?”

“Well... in *Jaws*, they were fighting a shark,” Ben tries, and God, this guy is exactly as too fucking nice as he was when he was about a foot shorter and two feet wider, because he’s actually humoring Richie with this. “We were fighting something decidedly less... normal, so it makes sense that what follows might be a bit abnormal, too.”

“A bit abnormal? You’re calling all this *a bit abnormal*, Haystack?”

Ben grins again, tilting his head. *Yeah, okay, Trashmouth*, that grin says. *You got me there.*

Richie huffs a sigh, takes another sip of coffee. It’s getting into the sort of hours that normal people don’t touch coffee with a ten foot pole, but Richie’s never had a problem falling asleep with a whole lot worse than *caffeine* buzzing through his system. He raises an eyebrow at the root Ben’s just gotten done peeling and slicing up into little yellow disks like quarters and, unable to hold off the question any longer, he asks, “What the hell are you making, anyway?”

“Tea.”

“Tea,” Richie repeats, skeptical.

Ben grabs the box to his immediate right, spins it around so the label’s facing Richie, and then pushes it across the island toward him. “Tea.”

“Okay, sure, but does tea usually involve so much...” Richie gestures vaguely at the entire island, “... work?”

“Not always. But this isn’t just tea. It’s the Hanscom family cold cure, too,” Ben says with a proud little smile, dumping a bunch of those little yellow disks into a mug the size of a soup bowl. “Works like magic every time.”

“What, the kid’s still under the weather?”

“Georgie’s okay, mostly, just on the upswing now,” Ben says, “but that’s the best time for it.”

Richie frowns, tapping his fingers around the edge of his mug. He’d known, of course, that the kid wasn’t feeling too hot — literally not too hot, he didn’t have the sniffles or a headache or a fever, nothing, just said he felt *cold* no matter how many blankets and pillows he was drowning in. Cold and tired, that was it. The same damn thing happens to Eddie, too, and they confirmed via group chat that Stan was no exception, either.

All at the same time, every time, like a synchronized wave of cold knocking them each off their feet without warning.

The one nice thing is that it does seem to pass every time. Eddie walks around the house in a parka like it’s not mid-August, Georgie holes up in his bedroom with Bill reading to him until he falls asleep, and the next day they’re all alright again.

“You feel like making an extra cup of that?” Richie asks before he can talk himself out of it.

Ben’s eyebrows perk up for just half a second, and Richie knows exactly what’s going through his head, the smug prick, but he doesn’t say anything about the fact that Richie’s definitely not asking for *Richie* and both of them know it.

Instead he just turns and reaches up into the cabinet behind him with those ridiculous Clark Kent shoulders of his, and he slides out another mug.

Because— yeah, okay, so maybe Richie gets a little on edge when he hasn’t seen Eds for a while. And maybe, occasionally, every so often, when he closes his eyes and his head’s not totally in the right place, he still sees Eds with that spike through his chest and his body being thrown across the cave like a fucking ragdoll and blood spilling out of his mouth. Maybe he feels all of this so *vividly* that it’s like the thought of it is still eating him the fuck alive from the inside out, but he can’t just go ahead and *tell* Eddie any of that because Eddie’s lived his entire life with people fussing over him and insisting that he’s fragile but Richie *literally* saw him die and—

But this isn't that. This isn't Richie, yesterday morning, sending a text within hours of Eds leaving for New York because there was a moment when he'd been totally fucking positive that he'd imagined the whole resurrection thing from the get-go.

This isn't that.

Eddie got home in the middle of the night last night, and he hasn't stepped outside of his bedroom all day today. And with Georgie under the weather, it only makes sense that Eddie must be, too. Only makes sense to spread this so-called magic Hanscom family recipe around, see if there's anything to it.

Ben pours the mugs, bobs the tea bags up and down a few times, plops a whole half a lemon's worth of wedges into each, and slides one across the island to Richie.

"Thanks, Haystack."

"Any time, Trashmouth."

Richie leaves his mug of coffee behind and takes the mug of tea, striding out of the kitchen and up the stairs toward the room that's technically a *guest room*, even Eddie calls it a *guest room*, but which most everyone else has come to think of as Eddie's room. Even if he still hasn't unpacked his ridiculously overstuffed suitcases yet, even if he never explicitly says that he's sticking around.

The door's open just a crack, and Richie raps his knuckles on it with his free hand.

"Eds?"

There's a faint sound in response to that, so faint that Richie barely notices it, and even what he *does* hear only sounds like a vague sort of hum.

Richie knocks again and hikes his voice up in pitch. "*Room service, you want mint for pillow?*"

The hum is a little less vague now, a little more pronounced, and Richie definitely catches the cadence of a *fuck off* in there

somewhere, which he can't help grinning like an idiot at. He gently elbows the door open, *oh* so slowly, so that if Eds yells at him to get the fuck out then Richie can do so without having already barged all the way in. But no such screaming epithets come.

What he finds when he opens the door is not Eddie.

What he finds instead is, by all appearances, a *literal* mountain of fabric piled on top of the bed. It's as high as it would be if a whole other mattress was stacked on top of the first, blankets and comforters and sheets.

As he watches, though, the mound of blankets gently lifts an inch or two and then sinks back down. A breath.

"Oh, be still my beating heart," Richie says, a hand on his chest as he leans against the doorframe. "Mrs. K, is that really you hiding under all those blankets?"

The blankets nearest the headboard shift around a bit, and one single hand pokes out long enough to flip Richie the bird. His smile grows, and Christ, it's wild how something so simple can remind him of how much he just genuinely missed Eddie so much he *ached*, how insane it is that Eddie's *actually, really back*. The hand swiftly retreats underneath the safety of the blankets, but the weird fluttery feeling in Richie's chest is apparently here to stay.

Richie's definitely got a joke on the tip of his tongue — something like, *Oh, fuck you? Well, if you insist, Mrs. K, I know it's been a while* — but he swallows it down.

"So, uh, Hanscom made you some sort of... pick-me-up tea? I don't know," Richie says, shrugging and crossing the room to place the mug on his side table. "He says it's a magic cold cure, so you know, figure it'll probably help with an actual magic cold. Only one way to find out, huh?"

There's another groan from beneath the blankets, and Richie leans to the side, narrowing his eyes and searching for— *ah-ha*, there he is. A tuft of brownish hair peeking out from a pile of pillows near the headboard.

“You good in there, man?”

Another groan, and Eddie shoves ineffectually at the blanket mountain until his entire head is just about visible, and then he opens one eye and peers up at Richie. He looks utterly fucking miserable, dark bags under his eyes and the faintest hint of scruff on his cheeks — and isn’t that as sure a sign as any that he’s feeling awful, Eddie Kaspbrak skipping out on his strict two hour hygiene regimen and going *one whole day* without shaving his face baby smooth.

“Am I dead?” Eddie asks, his voice croaky and quiet. “Again?”

“If you are, you just said about four more words than most dead guys do,” Richie says, and because he feels a little weird towering over the side of the bed, he sits down on the edge of the mattress with his back to the headboard, one knee bent up so he can face Eddie.

“Ngh,” Eddie groans, shoving his entire face into the pillows in a way that is... not cute, objectively it’s not, but it makes Richie’s chest flutter again all the same. Eddie’s voice is muffled when he says, “Thought I might be again.”

“Nah, you’re alright, Eds.”

Eddie lets out another long groan, so long that Richie nearly makes a comment about who the real six-year-old in this house is, and then he whines into the pillow, “‘M *cold*, Rich.”

“Still? You got like a metric ton of blankets on you, man.”

“S like seven,” Eddie murmurs. “Eight?” Then he shrugs, blankets shifting.

“What, and that’s not enough?”

Eddie shakes his head, burrowing deeper with a shiver. “‘S so fucking cold... ‘S why I think I might be dead. Not... making any heat, y’know? ‘N the cave was like that... It was *so fucking cold*, Rich.”

Richie frowns. “You’re not dead, man.”

“Y’sure?” Eddie mumbles.

And all Richie can think about is Stan, sitting at that bar at the Derry fucking Town House last week, Ben's hotel duvet around his legs and a haunted look in his eyes. *We don't even know if this is permanent*, he'd said, *and I don't know about the rest of them, but I definitely still feel like death frozen over.*

"Yeah, Eds," Richie says. "I'm sure."

Because he is. Fuck whatever qualms anyone else might have with this shit, Richie's not buying it. Stan's back, Georgie's back, *Eddie's back*, he's right here in front of Richie breathing and alive, and Richie's gonna stop the whole fucking world before he lets it keep spinning on again with an Eddie Kaspbrak shaped hole in it. Just fucking watch him.

"You're not dead, and you're not dying. You're just— actually, you know what? Yeah, alright, hang on. Give me a second."

He makes to hop off the bed, but then, quick as anything, quicker than Eddie seemed capable of moving at all, Eddie's arm snakes out from under his blanket cave and latches onto Richie's sleeve. His grip is about as strong as that of an arthritic ninety-year-old, but Richie freezes right where he's at anyway, the thought of moving suddenly a far-off impossibility.

His butt sinks into the mattress again and stays there.

Eddie mumbles something, something that Richie's only marginally sure was meant to sound like, *Where you going?*

"I was gonna... um," Richie gulps, trying to get his thoughts back in working order. "Gonna see if they got any more of those electric blankets around here. Sit tight, dude, I'll be right back."

"Nuh-uh," Eddie shakes his head, dropping his hand away from Richie's arm so that Richie can finally pull a real breath into his lungs again. "'M fine."

"Dude," Richie sighs. "You *just* got done telling me you thought you were dead."

"I wasn't..." Eddie starts to argue, loses steam, and sighs. Yeah, he's

really fucking out of it, taking that *cold and tired* that he and Stan and Georgie have all described with varying degrees of coherency and dialing it up to eleven. “M not... I can handle it. The cold. ‘S fine.”

“Oh?”

“Mm-hmm. It always... passes, eventually,” Eddie slurs. He’s been mumbling all of this halfway into the crease between two pillows, but he turns his head just a little to open one eye and look at Richie again. He still looks — *sad*, Richie’s traitorous fucking brain provides, *sad*, like he’d looked when he was slumped against that cave wall while choking on his own blood, *sad sad sad* — and Richie grits his teeth against the thought. “Can you just... talk?”

Richie blinks. All thoughts of Eds bleeding out are gone in an instant; his brain had essentially been an overworked circuit and then, with four words, Eds went ahead and cut the power off entirely.

“Can I... what, now?”

“Talk.”

“Talk?”

Eddie nods, snuggling deeper into his pillows. “The cold’s... fine,” he murmurs. “Sucks, but it’s fine. ‘S the quiet I can’t stand. Not... not used to it, ‘n then I think I’m *there* again, and...”

He trails off, and then loses the end of his sentence entirely. Or he actively decides it’s not worth the effort to finish.

“So you...” Richie gulps. “You just want me to talk?”

“Yeah,” Eddie murmurs. “Yeah. Helped, after... after Myra. After N’York. Distraction, it was... nice. Really nice.”

Finally, finally, Richie’s brain returns to him. It’s a sputtering, faltering return, but some of the old gears pick up some grease and get turning again, even if his heart’s still pounding in his ears. “*Hoo*, man,” he says, cracking a smile. “Eddie Kaspbrak asking me to talk, who’d’ve thought, huh? Either the world really has ended, or something’s seriously off with you right now, man.”

He reaches out to brush some of Eddie's hair from where it's plastered to his skull, intending to put the back of his hand to Eddie's forehead and make some joke like *oh, no, Eds, I think you feel exactly 0.2 degrees off of normal, we better get you to the ICU stat—*

But Eddie hums, turning his head so that Richie's hand remains in his hair, and he mumbles, "Mm."

Richie's brain stalls again. "Huh?"

He's frozen, fingers still in Eddie's hair, and Eddie lets out an annoyed whine that pretty clearly says *hey asshole I didn't tell you to stop*, and so Richie starts combing through his hair again, carefully, evenly.

Holy shit.

Fuck. Okay.

Yep, this is fine. Totally fine.

Eddie feels like shit, and he's too cold, and he may or may not be having moments where he genuinely believes he's either dead again or trapped in that fucking cave under Neibolt again, but he's *alive*, he's lying here right next to Richie bundled in an absurd amount of blankets and being all sleepy and grumpy and ornery and *Eddie*, when just over a week ago Richie had all but actually fallen apart at the seams because Eddie was *gone, gone, gone, and he's never coming back—*

Richie takes a breath to steady himself, shifts an inch or two closer, drags his fingers through Eddie's hair with a slow lilting rhythm, and tries to silence the creature in his chest that's yapping and clawing at his lungs and begging him to do something truly idiotic.

He clears his throat.

"I ever tell you about the time I almost got kidnapped by a drug dealer in college?"

Eddie hums a vague no, and Richie settles back against the headboard, working up the story in his head and figuring out all the

right embellishments to really make it land.

“Okay, so first off, I’m driving my old beat up Toyota, right, it was this old shitter I drove all through college,” Richie tells him. “And on *this* day, there happened to be a Batman mask and a full sheet cake in my backseat — don’t worry, I’ll get to that later — and this guy, Eds, I don’t even remember his name now, but he says to me...”

At some point in the night, Eddie blinks awake to find three things.

One, he is sweating his ass off under a shitload of blankets.

Two, he’s still exhausted, but... pleasantly so, this time, like he’d enjoy burrowing into the pillows again and drifting off for a few more cozy hours, not like he’s actively dying and can’t keep his eyes open a second longer.

And three, someone’s snoring.

Richie, he thinks immediately. Richie’s snoring. And Eddie suddenly feels jettisoned back into middle school sleepovers, slumber parties at Richie’s where they’d both try to stay awake as long as they possibly could, swapping comic books and eating junk food all night. Richie was always the first to cave and fall asleep in those days, Eddie *remembers* that now. It’s like it was goddamn yesterday, and Richie’s snore has not changed much at all in twenty-seven years.

Eddie gets his hands underneath himself and heaves into a half-assed push-up, allowing a multitude of blankets to avalanche off his back and tumble off the side of the mattress. That solves the sweating on

death problem, at least.

Then he squints through the dark at Richie, who's actually sitting up against the headboard with his glasses askew and his mouth hanging wide open. Eddie spends a very sleepy second or two staring dumbly up at him, watching the rise and fall of his chest match up with those truly obnoxious snores, and then he comes to his senses and jabs him in the side.

"Hngk," Richie grunts, swatting Eddie's hand away. "Nuh-uh."

"Hey, dipshit, don't sleep like that," Eddie hisses at him, something about the darkness of the middle of the night forcing his voice to automatically adopt a whisper, even though there's no one else in the room to hear him.

"Hngk?"

"I said don't sleep like that. You'll fuck up your back."

"*Yeah*, you will," Richie mutters with his eyes still closed, but he shimmies down without further complaint until he's lying on his back, and then fumbles for his glasses and tosses them aside, blindly, so that they clatter to the floor somewhere a few feet away from the bed.

Then he shifts, getting one arm under a pillow and flopping onto his side, so that Eddie's left lying there staring at his back instead of his profile.

He drifts back off pretty quickly after that.

Eddie wakes once or twice or three times through that night, not because of nightmares, just because of who he is as a person. Murder clown or no murder clown, bleeding death in a disgusting nightmare cave or not, Eddie Kaspbrak does not konk out for a solid block of eight hours and wake up fully rested and refreshed for the day, he never has. He wakes, and he dozes, and he sleeps again.

Wake, doze, sleep. Rinse and repeat.

Besides, to say nothing of the worrying he does during the day — and there is already more than enough of that, thank you very much — his nightmares are few and far between lately. Dreams, yes, he dreams just about every night now, more than he ever did when he was alive the first time around. The dreams never stick, though, not like the nightmares always used to. These days his dreams leave him with a vague feeling he can never really place, something... warm, maybe, all over from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes. But that's not quite right, either.

Sometimes he wakes thinking of sea turtles, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them, or just one great big giant sea turtle the *size* of a hundred hundred sea turtles. Whatever size sea turtles are, Eddie wouldn't actually know.

Sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes there's no memory at all, no thought except for that nebulous warm-all-over *feeling*.

So, no, he does not have nightmares. Not lately, not really, not anymore.

But the same, apparently, can not be said of Richie.

He only notices it the first time because he's already in that half-awake half-asleep state, lying there with the outline of of a sea turtle imprinted in reddish light beneath his eyelids, waiting patiently for true sleep to take him again, vaguely attuned to the sounds in the room as he dozes. Richie's breathing is the only sound in the room, really, and Eddie lies there and listens to it because it's slow and rhythmic and soothing in a way he can't really quantify.

And then, abruptly, it's not.

His breathing picks up, and Eddie becomes a little less asleep, a little more awake, and he listens. He's experienced enough panic attacks in his life to know what it sounds like when someone's freaking out, when they can't catch their breath because something is *terrifying* them, even in sleep. He spends a groggy few minutes listening to that, too, wondering if he should shake Richie awake — or if maybe it might be kinder to let him ride it out, to not risk jarring him awake while he's in the midst of a battle with Pennywise (Eddie can only assume) and not give him a chance to either reach a good end of the dream or let it pass from his memory entirely, like most dreams do.

Eventually, feeling vaguely guilty over it, Eddie settles uncertainly on the latter. He does scoot over, though; Richie's sleeping sprawled on his back while Eddie's lying on his stomach, hugging the pillow under his head, and he scoots until his upper arm is pressed against Richie's. Just in case it helps.

It seems to. Richie's breath hitches, just once, and then it evens back out.

The second time, though, Eddie doesn't have time to wonder whether he should wake Richie or not. He's not given a choice in the matter.

Eddie has no idea how much time has passed since the last time he was awake, but one second he's sleeping a nice peaceful dreamless sleep, and the next there's an elbow in his back and a foot kicks his leg, and he has exactly enough time to hiss-shout, "*Jesus— fuck, what —?!*" before he hears a shaky, desperate gasp from about two feet away.

"... Rich?"

Eddie props himself up on his elbows, opening his eyes as wide as they'll go like that's gonna help him see any better in the low light. As his eyes adjust, though, he finds Richie lying exactly where he's been all night, flat on his back, wild black hair and shining eyes and open mouth illuminated only in barely-there blues and grays from the moonlight streaming in through the far window.

Richie's staring wide-eyed up at the ceiling as his chest heaves, and either he's crying now or he was crying in his sleep, but either way Eddie can just make out tear tracks from the corners of his eyes down into his hair.

"Richie," Eddie tries again.

Still no answer, even though Richie definitely heard him that time, judging by the way he tenses for half a second. But instead of saying anything Richie just squeezes his eyes shut, covering them with one hand as he forces a slow and trembling breath, and then another. In and out. In and out. His— well, his *everything* is shaking, really, not just his hand.

"*Fuck*," Richie breathes, and that's all he says for a moment that seems to stretch on forever.

Eddie watches him, and he waits, and then he asks, "You wanna talk about it?"

Richie gulps, Eddie sees his throat bob and everything, and he shakes his head.

Again they lapse into silence, except for Richie trying and failing to get his breathing back into something resembling control, and Eddie's brain runs through a very short list of everything he could possibly do to help. Richie doesn't want to talk about it, so that's out, even though Eddie's anxiety is screaming at him to argue, and Richie doesn't seem to be having an actual bonafide panic attack, but in the back of Eddie's mind there are definitely a few useful tips for breathing that might help anyway, and—

He hears Richie mutter something under his breath, something that sounds suspiciously like, *ugh, fine, fuck it*, and then he rolls toward Eddie and hugs him.

Oh, Eddie thinks. *Yeah, okay, there's that, too.*

It's— well, it's *incredibly* awkward, because they're both lying down and Eddie hadn't even been really facing him, and Richie didn't seem too concerned with the mechanics of whose limbs should go where,

just needed contact and didn't give a shit how he got it. But Eddie adjusts. Despite the vice grip around his waist, he manages to maneuver around until Richie's face is somewhere around his collarbone rather than pressed to the side of his ribs, and Richie takes his movement as an opportunity to get *both* arms around him rather than leaving his right arm awkwardly bent in the space between them, and once he does that and Eddie gets his own arms around Richie's shoulders to reciprocate, it's far less awkward and actually, surprisingly, kind of nice.

Or it would be, anyway, if he wasn't about ninety percent sure that Richie's crying. Only ninety, because although Richie's shaking in earnest now and clinging to Eddie's waist like he might drown otherwise, there isn't actually any *sound* coming out of him.

It's only when he feels — feels, not hears — Richie take in a quick shuddering breath and then hold it, that Eddie realizes that Richie's literally holding his breath to try and stop crying.

The goddamn fucking *moron*.

"Hey," Eddie mutters, nudging Richie with his chin. "Don't do that."

Richie can't even let his breath go for long enough to play dumb and ask, *Do what, Eds? I'm not doing anything at all, nope, I sometimes hold my breath while clinging to my best friend for dear life just for fun, no biggie.*

"Breathe, Rich," Eddie tells him, trailing one hand up and down his back while the other forearm can only hold onto his shoulders, what with his bicep pinned as it is beneath Richie's head. Eventually he'll have to go about the cumbersome task of adjusting the pillow, pulling it down firmly under his own head so he can stay like this without fucking up his neck, but that would require letting go of Richie and he's not quite willing to do that, not yet. "Come on, asshole, I've seen you covered in shit water and screaming and crying like a baby, and you suddenly think you need to hold back now?"

Either that gets through to him, or Richie physically cannot hold the breath any longer, because he finally lets out a trembling exhale into Eddie's chest and fists the back of his shirt.

And the sound of Richie crying in broken little gasping sobs just grabs at something inside Eddie's chest and *twists* in a way that has nothing to do with the bodily fluids getting all over his shirt, but shit, at least Richie *is* crying now, no more holding his breath and risking giving himself (and, consequently, Eddie) a fucking anyuerism.

Jesus.

Eddie tightens his hold, like he can somehow fend off Richie's nightmares with just his two arms shielding his back. He angles his head down, not so much kissing the top of Richie's head like he'd done with Bev but just... planting his whole face there, so every time he speaks he's murmuring the words into Richie's hair — Richie's hair which he notices has definitely recently been washed and smells like sandalwood and, oddly, coffee.

Not that that matters.

"You're okay," Eddie murmurs, giving into the heaviness that pulls his eyes shut, mechanically running his hand up and down Richie's back, breathing in the smell of some kind of West Coast hipster coffee shop, which is... nice. It's nice, *this* is nice, the crying notwithstanding. "I'm here, Rich, okay? I'm not going anywhere."

When Richie wakes, he feels sort of like a freshly wrung out dish towel.

He knows he was crying at some point in the night, he can guess he did a whole hell of a *lot* of crying judging by the scraped up feeling in his chest and the headache pounding behind his eyes, but he has only

the vaguest recollection of the nightmare that caused it — which is about all the recollection he fuckin' needs, given that all of his nightmares lately revolve around the same damn thing.

He also knows that Eddie was there.

Not in the dream, though he was certainly there, too.

In the bed. With Richie. Because Richie passed out in the middle of some long-winded story with his back to the headboard of *Eddie's bed* with his glasses still on and everything, and Eddie woke up long enough to recognize that he was there and give him shit for sleeping in a weird position, but for whatever reason Eddie didn't kick him out of the bed. He didn't tell Richie to go to his own bedroom even though it's — what, fifty feet away? And Richie had been too groggy from sleep to question it for one single second.

Now, though? Now he's not groggy at all, not one fuckin' bit.

Is he worn the hell out? Yes. Is he experiencing some weird combination of embarrassment and something queasy settling right above his diaphragm like he might nervous-puke if he doesn't hold perfectly still? Also yes. Is his heart pounding like a set of fuckin' bongos in his temples again? Yep. Is everything blurry as hell because his glasses are somewhere on the other side of the *continent* for all he knows? Absolutely.

But groggy? No-sir-ee.

He can feel, with picture perfect clarity that even his glasses can never quite afford him, the fact that he's still lying on his side on a mattress that's soft as all hell, and his head is pillowed on something that is decidedly not a pillow, and his shoulder's in some fucked up position that he's gonna regret in a few hours, and his right arm is pinned beneath the weight of—

Eddie. His right arm is under Eddie's back, pins and needles tingling from his elbow all the way to the tip of his middle finger. His pinky and ring finger are completely numb. Eddie's arm is warm and solid under Richie's right ear, and because Richie totally fucking froze the moment he realized where he was, Eddie's torso is also warm and

solid and *breathing* under Richie's left arm.

Richie's brain, of course, takes him through the instinctive panic. The gut reaction that's been ingrained in his code since fucking Derry, the *I shouldn't be here* panic, the *I shouldn't even be thinking of this* panic, the *get the hell out of dodge and scrub your whole brain fucking clean before he finds out* panic.

But... before he finds out *what*, exactly?

Eds knows. Maybe not all of it. He doesn't know about all those times that Richie found himself daydreaming about shit like this as a kid. He doesn't know about all the times Richie made excuses to just *be* around Eddie, whether it was sneaking him out his bedroom window at one in the morning or just spending too much time in the hammock at the clubhouse. Hell, until recently *Richie* didn't know about all those times. More memories of that keep on surfacing, more and more every day.

But Eds knows the— the *big* thing.

Richie took that leap, jumped right into that pit and came out still standing. Contrary to everything he was ever told as a kid, he did not, in fact, burst into flames or get fucking smited on the spot. And also contrary to everything he was ever told as a kid, the people who he cares about still care about him. Every single one of them.

Eds knows, and he still invited Richie into his bed like they were a couple of kids at a sleepover, like nothing's changed in the last twenty-seven years, or in the last few days for that matter. He didn't kick Richie out of the bed when he finally came to his senses. He didn't complain when Richie freaked out over a nightmare and wrapped himself around Eddie like a fucking koala — shit, Eddie hugged him *back*, and he never bothered extricating himself from Richie's arms even after Richie fell back asleep.

Which is... good. It's good. Eddie is still his friend. Eddie still *cares*.

It's not like anything's changed with them. This is nothing like *that*, nothing like the sort of thing thirteen-year-old Richie would have popped a fucking blood vessel over.

But it's... something. Something that doesn't actually mean anything, sure, at least not to Eddie, and doesn't *that* hurt like a son of a bitch, but — well, that also means this is probably going to be a one-and-done deal. That means that this is very likely to be the one and only time, in his entire life, that Richie is going to get to wake up to this.

Means Richie had damn well better appreciate it while he's got it.

Richie flexes his right hand, working some feeling back into the whole limb, and then he closes some of the scant distance between them so that his forehead comes to rest on Eddie's ribs, so that each slow and steady breath that lifts Eddie's chest moves him, too. The knots in his own chest don't quite unknot, but they loosen up just a hair.

Fuck it, he thinks. After all that shit, doesn't he deserve a few minutes like this?

So Richie shoves down the doubts, shoves down the sharp pain of *this is never happening again, Tozier, it shouldn't even be happening now*, shoves down the insistence from everyone else — Eddie himself, Stan, the Derry fucking local news — that there must be some catch to this whole resurrection thing, that he's gonna wake up one day and they'll all be fucking gone again, and he just... breathes. He breathes, he lets his breathing match pace with Eddie's, and he waits until sleep starts to pull him back under.

And for a few blessed fantastic hours, he doesn't dream of the deadlights again.

Notes for the Chapter:

me, knowing full well that this is not the one and only time in his life that richie will wake up to this: oh no this is the one and only time in his life that richie will get to wake up to this :'(

next chapter we get more of stanley (and patty! can't forget patty, stan really said "rip to the other losers

but i'm different" and married someone he genuinely loves and who loves him huh) and more of georgie and the other losers, and some more pining, and then i believe i'll finally be able to wrap this up, maybe i can manage that without extending this this a whole ass other 20k words, but who knows

3. if we stick together, maybe we'll become each other's guides

Notes for the Chapter:

me @ me: you know the first chapter would have been a nice oneshot all on its own, you know that would have been a fine place to end it, you know you don't have to keep going--

me @ me: but then WHAT would i do with all this HOT GARBAGE CLOGGING MY BRAIN??

anyway.

warnings for this chapter: another brief but very vague mention of stan's death, some drinking, richie making a (sort of?) dead baby joke, a discussion on breaking the cycle of abuse, eddie and his Big Gay Identity Crisis a.k.a. he just flat out refuses to think about it, and a depiction of a panic attack toward the end there

“Hey, Stan the Man.”

White noise is the first thing to come through the receiver. A television playing lowly, the sort of rumbling hum that Eddie thinks might be an air conditioner, maybe a fan, too. Then there's the sliding of a glass door, and all of that cuts off in favor of the faint chirp of crickets — that, and the voice of his formerly dead friend, quiet but attentive. “Hey, what's up, man?”

“Hey,” Eddie says again, dumbly. He's in the guest bedroom of what Richie is still insisting on calling the *Losers' Clubhouse 2.0*, the guest bedroom in which he's taken up residence for the past week, sitting on the floor with his back against the side of the bed frame. He rolls his head back against the mattress, glancing up at the bedside clock, and the numbers 11:07 glare back at him. “This a bad time? I don't have to—”

"No, no," Stan says. "Come on, it's fine. Not like my schedule's packed."

Eddie shrugs. "You could've been asleep."

"Sure, I could've been, but I wasn't." There's a faint creak, a quiet relieved sigh, and for some reason Eddie imagines Stan dropping down into a white wicker porch chair. That feels like the kind of aesthetic Stanley would've gone for as an adult, and it feels very *Georgia*, but it's not like Eddie would know either of those things for sure. "What's up?"

This time he doesn't say it like *hey, what's up man*. This time it's more like *something's up and I know it, Kaspbrak, so spill*.

"Nothing, I just— I don't know," Eddie says. "Wanted to check in. Hear your voice, I guess. Is that—?" He winces at the empty room. "Is that weird? It's weird, isn't it? Yeah, that's definitely—"

"It's not weird, man, relax," Stan laughs. "I get it, you know? Me, too."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really, dumbass. What, is that so hard to believe?"

"Well... I mean, it's— I don't know, it's a *little* different."

"Not that different."

"You *died*, man."

"Uh. So did you?"

"Yeah, but you didn't *know* I died," Eddie reminds him. "Not until you were already seeing me again in those caves. We all knew about... what happened to you. We knew for like, at least a few days before you came back."

"Okay, sure, but come on, what's a few days stacked up against twenty-seven years?" Stan asks, breezing right past the mention of his own death. "You guys weren't dead, but I still... you know. Cared."

Missed you assholes, though for the *life* of me I cannot imagine why.”

“You—?” Eddie hesitates, feels his eyebrows meet in the middle as he stares at the opposite wall. His back straightens. “Stan, did you *remember* us that whole time?”

“I mean... kind of, yeah,” Stan says. There’s a rustling sound as he moves the phone around, maybe switching it over to his other ear. “It was always pretty hazy, like, hazier than childhood memories are supposed to be, I guess, but from the way you guys tell it I still remembered a lot more than any of you did. I don’t know why, it was just...” He huffs a sigh. “I don’t know, man. I never remembered it *exactly*, so I had no clue why I was so terrified of clowns my whole life right up until Mike called, but that fucking—” the phone rustles again, and he sighs again — “that woman. In the painting. She never... She never went away. I never forgot her.”

“Shit,” Eddie breathes, tipping his head back against the mattress again. He’d never seen the leper as an adult, not once, not even in his nightmares. “*Shit*, dude. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Stan says right away. “You guys killed It.”

Eddie nods, then remembers Stan can’t see him nodding, and so he says, very intelligently, “Yeah.” Then he pulls his knees up to his chest, leaning his uninjured cheek onto them and staring at the bedside table clock until the numbers feel like they’re seared into his retinas. 11:10 ticks over to 11:11. *Make a wish.*

“So how’s your return to the land of the living so far, Stanley?”

“Oh,” Stan says, then blows a raspberry, and Eddie can picture it crystal clear: Stan’s eyes going wide, eyebrows raised, rolling his eyes and shaking his head after. “It’s *great*. I’ll tell you what, I’m lucky I grew up with you and Richie—”

“I am so telling him you said that—”

“— shut up,” Stan says, then continues like he was never interrupted, “because thanks to you two, this whole ordeal of annulling my death certificate only ranks as the *second* most pain-in-the-ass thing I’ve

ever dealt with in my life. But it's still solidly in second place."

"Wow. Worse than the clown?"

"*Worse than the clown*," Stan repeats under his breath, and Eddie imagines him rolling his eyes again. He didn't realize how much he missed Stan rolling his eyes. "That clown has *nothing* on the Fulton County Records Office, man. Nothing. It goes like this: Eddie Kaspbrak and Richie Tozier giving me ulcers and gray hair at age thirteen, then the death certificate annulment, then the clown. In that order on the pain-in-my-ass scale."

Eddie's shoulders shake, and he ducks his head down into his knees. "Ow, dick. Laughing hurts, come on."

"So did the ulcers, Kaspbrak."

Eddie physically grabs at his own mouth, forcing himself to stop pulling at the still healing hole in his cheek until he has some control over his face. Then he drops his hand and says, "Okay, so other than the paperwork, then."

"Other than the paperwork, it's... nice. Really, it's nice."

"Mm. How's the wife?"

"Also nice. More than nice."

"She take it well, then?"

"What? What do you mean? I told you guys she did."

"Stanley, you sent one single thumbs up emoji to the group chat."

"Yeah. Exactly."

Eddie huffs a laugh. "Okay, so she took it well. Got it."

"She did. Yeah. All things considered. Well— okay, she did faint when she saw me. But then she woke up, and I was still there and alive, and she hadn't hallucinated me. It could pretty much only go uphill from there, so... you know."

Eddie doesn't, not technically, but he says anyway, "Yeah."

"How about everyone there? How's Georgie?"

"Oh, Georgie's good," Eddie says, and it's pretty much true. "Bill's thinking about homeschooling him for a year since every single school system in Penobscot County is beyond over-registered now. I mean, every school system *and* every adoption center and orphanage and foster home in the tri-county area, too, but none of that's relevant for Georgie, thank God. And yeah, I mean, he's... He's fine. This morning Ben helped him make the most *involved* blanket fort I've ever seen in my life, you wouldn't have believed it."

"I don't know, I might have. It's Ben."

"Even for Ben, man, it was..." Eddie shakes his head. "It had *rooms*. What kind of blanket fort has separate rooms?"

"The kind made by Ben Hanscom, I guess. Georgie liked it, though?"

"Loved it," Eddie says without hesitation. "I was trying to get out of the house and go for a run, and I ended up trapped in that blanket fort instead for like, three straight hours with Ben and Bill. My back still hasn't recovered."

"Oof."

"Yeah. Didn't mind it, though. Not really."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. It's... nice, you know? Seeing him happy like that," Eddie admits, playing absently with a loose thread on the bottom hem of his pajama pants. "He doesn't remember what happened to him all that well, but he still, like, *remembers* it? I don't know, it's like, if you asked him how he lost his arm he wouldn't be able to tell you, but he remembers the boat and that something really bad happened to him and that there was *some* kind of monster but he can't really remember *what* the monster was. And he still gets spooked really easily and he hates the dark and he gets nervous when it rains, and being left alone for more than a few minutes sends the poor guy into hysterics. So, you know, it's... nice. When he's happy."

“Yeah,” Stan agrees. “Yeah, I’m glad he doesn’t remember all of it, at least. I was— well, Patty and I, we were reading up on all the people that came back, and—”

“And most of them don’t remember, either,” Eddie finishes for him. He’s only been reading every single article posted online about this for the past week, setting up alerts on his phone, scouring message boards. “They don’t remember how they died.”

“But we do,” Stan says. “And Vicky and Dean, they remembered it perfectly. Like it was yesterday.”

“Well, I mean, it kinda was.”

“You think that’s how it works?” Stan asks. “We died last week, so we remember it alright, but Georgie’s death is fuzzy because it happened twenty-seven years ago?”

Eddie shrugs, wraps the loose thread around three of his fingers and gives it a solid tug. It doesn’t come loose, just unwinds more of the hem of his pants. He knew that was gonna happen and he did it anyway. Shit. “I don’t know, but that makes about as much sense as any of this, doesn’t it? One of the kids, I was reading about her, she talked to a reporter a few days ago, she’s apparently from one of the cycles back in... I don’t know, eighteen something? And she couldn’t remember anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Just her name and a few bits and pieces from her life, and the year she thought it was supposed to be. That’s it, though.”

“Shit.”

“Right?”

“How old was she?”

“Like... eight or nine, I think.”

“*Shit*,” Stan mutters, and there’s a second or two of silence before he says, “That’s— yeah. Shit.”

He falls quiet again, and this time there's nothing but the faint cricket chirping for long enough that Eddie starts to get irrationally nervous. "Stanley?"

"Sorry, I'm here," Stan says. "What about everyone else? How's the rest of the Losers Club doing?"

It feels like a deliberate move, like Stan's skirting around some topic he'd rather not touch, and Eddie doesn't push. "They're good. Yeah. I mean, you already know we finally got Mike out of the house."

"Yeah, about damn time," Stan says. "I still don't know how you guys managed that."

Eddie shrugs. "It wasn't actually that hard. He was running himself into the ground, he needed a break."

And it's true; as much as Eddie wants to know what the hell happened to bring him and Stan and everybody back, as much as he wants answers — about in equal measure to how much he's also oddly dreading what those answers might be — no one had taken kindly to seeing Mike working tirelessly trying to find them, volunteering at the records offices, staying late nights at the library driving himself up a wall.

They'd all banded together to force him to take some time off, to board a plane and go *somewhere* that wasn't here, fucking anywhere, even if it's only for a few days. And for some reason unbeknownst to the rest of them, Richie had single-handedly vetoed Florida, somehow convincing Mike at the very last minute to try Arizona instead.

He landed yesterday and has been sending picturesque panorama shots to the group chat since the moment he stepped off the plane.

"But yeah, Mike's doing great. And everyone else is doing pretty good, too, I mean, I told you about the blanket fort. Ben and Bev are almost *weirdly* good with Georgie, like, I'm almost positive those guys are about one more day away from announcing that they're gonna start having kids of their own. And Bill's— well," Eddie shrugs. "He's Bill. I think he's working on a new book, so he's got his nose in his laptop most of the time, but he's... happier, now. Obviously, I mean,

that was kind of a given but, like, he's *visibly* happier, you know? And you'd think three decades of not having a little brother would have made him a little awkward with kids, but it didn't, not even a little bit. He's a natural at it. Maybe you just never really stop being a big brother, or... I don't know, maybe that's just Bill."

"Yeah, that kind of sounds like Bill."

Eddie breathes a laugh, rolls the thread between his fingers, staring into space. There's a second or two in which Stanley says nothing else, just taking it all in, maybe.

And then he asks, "What about Richie?"

Oh. Right, yeah. Richie was the only one he left out of that list. Of course Stan would pick up on that.

But Eddie hesitates, because the truth of it is, Richie's been... a little off today. Off in a way that'd be hard to explain to Stanley. Averting his eyes every time Eddie looks at him, always choosing a seat that's separated from him by one or two other people. It's barely anything, wouldn't have even been noticeable in the *first* place, if not for the fact that Richie's casual touches, the leaning on Eddie's shoulder, the elbow nudges, the bumping into him just to be a dickhead — *all* of that slotted so easily back into its place in Eddie's brain along with the rest of the memories that were stolen from him when he left Derry, and now...

He'd gone without it for decades, just as he'd gone without Mike's unshakeable faith and Bev's carefree laugh and Ben's shy smiles, and now going without is like— it's like a phantom fucking limb, okay? Eddie notices it. He can't *not* notice it.

And the only reason for its absence that Eddie's managed to guess is that, maybe, Richie's embarrassed by the fact that Eddie witnessed his post-nightmare breakdown last night. That's it, that's all he's got. Which is fucking *ridiculous*, even for Richie "I Don't Have Regular Human Feelings" Tozier, absolutely and utterly ridiculous after all the fucked up shit they've been through together.

"Eddie?"

“Uh, yeah, he’s— good, too,” Eddie says, then shakes his head and adds, “I don’t know, man, it’s Richie.”

“... That’s fair, I guess,” Stan admits, and Eddie lets out a breath when he doesn’t press him to go any further into it. Instead he asks, “And what about you?”

Huh.

Okay, so maybe Richie *wasn’t* the only one he’d left out of the list.

“Me? I’m, uh...” Eddie trails off, and he finds himself wedging his free hand into the space between his knees and his chest, dragging the knuckle of his thumb over his sternum. There’s no scar there, no abnormalities whatsoever; he’d checked, that second day, and every single day after just in case. An itch crops up there every so often, though, under his skin, like maybe there really is a scar somewhere in there that’s too deep for him to see.

He considers saying *I’m fine*, because really, he is fine. Technically. Instead what comes out is:

“Have you been having weird dreams?”

Stan’s quiet for a second, and then he asks, “What, since...?”

“Since coming back, yeah.”

“Sometimes,” Stan answers, patient and honest. “Yeah. A lot less nightmares, though.”

“But you *have* been having weird dreams.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I have,” Stan says. Eddie keeps running his knuckle up and down his sternum, absently, listening to Stan breathe and work through whether he wants to tell Eddie about his dreams or if he’d rather keep them to himself. Eventually he must decide on the former, because he says, “It’s not bad, just... like you said. Weird. And there’s always... turtles, for some reason?”

Eddie huffs a breath, and even he can’t tell whether it’s a laugh or not. “Shit. Yeah. Sea turtles.”

“Like... a *shitload* of turtles,” Stan says. “Or just—”

“One giant turtle,” Eddie finishes for him. “And you feel... *weird* afterward, right? Like—”

“Warm,” Stan says right away, and Eddie feels his stomach flip. He drops his hand and hugs his legs again and tucks his face down into his knees. Stan continues, “Yeah, like... I don’t know. There’s this feeling, like, someone or— or something, I guess, is... watching me? But not in a bad way or anything like that, just like it’s keeping an eye out for me, or like it... wants to see me? Or like it’s— proud of me? Happy for me? I can never really tell.”

And that shouldn’t be what does it, but to Eddie’s absolute *mortifying* horror, the pressure in his throat and behind his eyes suddenly builds until, in the span of about three seconds, he goes from only kind of freaking out a little tiny bit to actually fucking *crying*. He clamps his free hand tight over his mouth and squeezes his eyes shut but the floodgates have already burst wide the fuck open so it really makes no difference at all, and then he tries pressing his fingers and his thumb into the corners of his eyes like that’ll help, like there aren’t tears rapidly spilling over anyway, like Stanley can’t hear the hitching in his breath.

“Eddie?”

“I’m— *shit*, I— I’m fine,” Eddie insists, taking a few shaking gulping breaths with his hand over his eyes. “I’m...” He sniffs, scrubs uselessly at his face. Jesus, he needs a fucking tissue or a goddamn wet wipe or *something*. “I’m fine.”

“Hey, you know, it’s okay,” Stanley says. “It’s okay if you’re not.”

Eddie hugs his legs closer, trembling and clutching the phone so tight his fingers are starting to ache, and he stares off toward the corner of the bedroom biting the inside of his lower lip to stop it wobbling, feeling like a scared little kid all over again. A scared little kid, back pressed to the wall as he watches Richie nearly getting his fucking face eaten off and he can only stand there, paralyzed—

“Fuck,” he mutters, unwilling to release his hold on his legs, so he

turns his head and scrubs his cheek on his shoulder to wipe away the fresh tears that won't fucking *stop*. "I just... I thought I was the only one."

"You thought you were the only one who's not okay," Stan deadpans, disbelieving.

"No, no, God, shit, obviously I'm not," Eddie says. "I know that. I meant—I meant the dreams."

"Well," Stanley says. "Yeah, no, you're definitely not the only one."

"You think they're all having them, too? All the other people that came back?"

"I don't know, man. Why? Do you?"

"I don't know, I just—I get the same feeling, after the dreams, and it's like— yeah, it's warm and it feels like something... I don't know, cares about me, I guess? Just like you said, but..." Eddie sniffs again, scrubs his face on his shoulder again, then lifts the hand holding the phone so he can use his upper arm to scrub the other side of his face, too. "But it feels like— like maybe whatever it is, the turtle or the shitload of turtles or whatever the fuck, it feels like it's trying to tell me something, and it feels— almost *sad* sometimes, like it's happy that I got to come back, it's happy that I'm not dead anymore, but it's like..."

He must hesitate for a second too long, because Stan sounds nervous when he asks, "Like what, man?"

"Like, I don't know, like it's trying to say, *hey, glad you're back, but you better enjoy it while it lasts*," Eddie admits. "Like we're all on borrowed time or something."

"What, you think this is only temporary?"

"No! No," Eddie shakes his head, because yeah, part of him definitely *does* think that, but God, he does not want Stan thinking that, too. "We're back, Stan, we're back for good."

"You sure about that?"

"As sure as I can be, right?" Eddie answers. "Just— shit, Stanley, just let *me* be the neurotic mess about all this, okay? Let that be my job. Leave that to me. I'll be the one driving myself nuts over shit that I don't need to drive myself nuts over."

"Sounds about par for the course."

Eddie does laugh then, even if it's punctuated with a truly embarrassing snuffle. "Yeah, exactly. Let me worry about what's... you know, about whatever I'm gonna worry about—"

"Which is everything—"

"Which is everything, yeah," Eddie agrees with a nod. "And you just focus on being back, okay? You go and... you know. Live."

"And what about you?"

"This is how I live, man, I can't help it," Eddie tells him, because it is. "Seriously. I'm gonna keep worrying about everything, there's really nothing to be done about that. So you just... get that death certificate annulled. Get your life back together. Hang out with your wife."

There's a quiet, bemused laugh from the other end. "Alright, man. If you insist."

"And come up and visit soon, too, okay?" Eddie adds. "I want my fucking car back."

That earns him an actual laugh, quick and loud, and Stan sighs, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Will do."

"And Stan?"

"Hm."

Eddie leans his uninjured cheek onto his knee again. "I'm really happy that you're alive. We all are. You know that, right?"

There's a pause, totally quiet except for that neverending chirp of crickets. Then, "Yeah. Of course I do. And likewise, man. I'd have been pretty pissed if I came back and you weren't around to be a

neurotic mess about all this.”

“Thanks. It’s a gift.”

“I’ll bet it is.”

Eddie smiles again, pressing the back of his wrist to his cheeks to dry them. He’s gonna fall asleep sitting here if he isn’t careful, and then his face is gonna feel *disgusting* in the morning if he doesn’t get the hell up now and get something to clean himself up with. He closes his eyes anyway.

“Love you, Stan the Man.”

“Love you, too, Eddie.”

“So what you have to do, and this is *very* important, you *cannot* forget this,” Eddie says, leaning in close and lowering his voice so that the gravity of this one bit of advice really sinks in, “is you have to layer the creamy peanut butter on one slice, and the crunchy peanut butter on the other. Creamy and crunchy. That’s *imperative*.”

Georgie, sitting at the kitchen island to Eddie’s left, opens his mouth and then he frowns up at him with his eyebrows pinched together. “What’s in-per-ah-tiff mean?”

“It’s a fancy word for important, Georgie,” Bev tells him, sitting on Georgie’s other side and without taking her eyes away from the laptop in front of her.

“Oh. Okay. But then why wouldn’t you just say it’s important?”

“That,” Eddie tells him, “is *not* imperative. We’re talking about peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, buddy. Stay on topic.”

“But why would you put peanut butter on *both* sides, though?”

“Yeah, Eddie, I gotta admit,” Ben says from the stove, where whatever he’s preparing for dinner tonight is sizzling away and letting off the mouth-watering smell of garlic and onions, “that sounds like a whole lot more peanut butter than anybody needs.”

“Trust me on this. Seriously, try it. Crunchy on one side, creamy on the other, jelly in the middle. You’ll never go back.”

Bill, who’s sitting across from them and has been mostly staring into his cup of coffee for the past twenty or so minutes, looks up now and narrows his eyes at Eddie. “Wait, aren’t you allergic to p – peanuts?”

“No, I’m allergic to cashews, not peanuts,” Eddie reminds him. *And maybe not even allergic to cashews, who fucking knows*, he thinks but doesn’t say, because that’s not really the issue here. “Come on, keep up. I wouldn’t have even been able to set *foot* inside that Thai place the other day if I was allergic to peanuts.”

There’s a yawn, then, from the direction of the hallway that leads to the staircase, and Eddie looks over his shoulder just as Richie comes padding into the kitchen, scrubbing both hands over the stubble on his face and looking like he’s just rolled out of bed.

Which he very likely has, even though it’s almost noon.

“Uh, yeah,” Eddie says, shaking his head and turning back to Bill. “I can still have peanut butter, we just... I just have to buy a special brand that doesn’t process all their nuts in the same place, that’s all.”

Eddie drums his fingers on the island, keeping Richie in his peripheral and trying — and, he suspects, probably failing — to be subtle about it. Sue him.

But today, it seems, things might actually be going back to normal, or whatever their version of normal is, because Richie stretches his

stupidly long arms up as far as they'll go over his head until his shirt rides up, yawns again until his jaw cracks, and then says, "I'll show *you* a place to process your nuts."

Eddie releases a breath.

"Dude," Eddie says, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "Come on."

"What?"

"That makes *zero* sense."

"Eh, it kinda makes sense," Richie shrugs, beelining around the kitchen island and ruffling Georgie's hair as he passes. He doesn't nudge Eddie's back with his elbow or hip check him just to be annoying, and Eddie absolutely does not pay too much attention to that. "Cut me some slack, dude, it's early."

Bev rolls her eyes, smiling. "It's eleven-thirty in the morning, Richie."

"Yeah. No sh— I mean, uh, no duh," Richie says, blushing a little at his near slip-up. As it turns out, he blushes a whole lot easier when he's still waking up in the morning. He reaches around Ben to get to the coffee maker, wriggling the pot off of it with one hand and snagging his favorite mug from the dish rack with the other. "That makes it... what, eight-thirty for me?"

"Ah, ah, ah, nope," Bill speaks up. "No West Coast excuse."

"Pfft. Why not?"

"We've all been on the East Coast for two weeks by now," Eddie reminds him, and it feels like he has to physically bite down on the word *dipshit* that wants to add itself onto the end there. Gotta remember Georgie. "You should be plenty adjusted."

"Also, eight-thirty isn't even that early," Ben adds, using a wooden spoon to stir and chop whatever's in the skillet in front of him.

That, evidently, catches Richie's attention — the skillet, not the fact that Ben doesn't consider eight-thirty to be early. Richie spins around, hooking his chin over Ben's shoulder to get a look at

whatever it is, and he coos, “Oh, Haystack, honey, sweetie pie, love of my life, *tell* me you’re making some kind of breakfast scramble. I might actually be wasting away to nothing over here.”

Ben gently tips his head against Richie’s by way of greeting. “Well, I hate to disappoint—”

“I’m certain you never could—”

“— but no, I’m actually just browning some ground turkey to throw it in the crockpot,” Ben says, nodding in the direction of the aforementioned appliance, “and we’ll have some chili ready for dinner tonight.”

“I stand corrected,” Richie sighs, pulling himself away from Ben and leaning his back to the counter instead, facing the island as he brings his coffee up for a sip. “Corrected and *thoroughly* disappointed.”

“Oh, how will I *ever* live with myself,” Ben sighs in a deliberate impersonation of Richie’s voice. It’s miles off, Ben’s voice being both too deep and too soft, but Eddie sees Richie grinning into his coffee cup all the same.

“Okay, so, now that the gang’s all here — and thank you for finally joining us, Richie,” Bev says with a nod in his direction, and he toasts her with his coffee. “I can finally get this show on the road.”

“Yes, yes, please,” Richie says, shimmying his shoulders in mock excitement. “Get that webcam rolling, Miss Marsh, I cannot wait another *moment* for our fifteen thousandth photo of some Arizona rocks.”

“Hey, we’re the ones that sent him there,” Bill says, shrugging, and Eddie tilts his head in agreement.

“Yeah, we’re the ones that sent him there,” Richie says, “because if he spent another day in fu... in, uh, in friggin’ Maine, he was gonna lose his mind. Doesn’t mean I need a new panoramic shot of the Grand Canyon in the group chat every ten seconds— *Ah, ha!* Is that Micycle or Staniel I’m hearing?”

Bev’s laptop just let off a little *ping* to let them all know a call

connected, and Eddie scoots his chair a little closer, squeezing himself and Georgie into Bev's right side, while Bill and Richie both circle around the island, Richie peeking over Bev's head and Bill peeking over Georgie's.

"Hey, guys!" Mike's voice sounds from the laptop, and a second later the right half of Bev's screen sharpens into an image of Mike with nothing but bright blue sky behind him.

Richie picks up a southern twang and sings, "Speak of the devil and he shall *appear!*"

"How you guys doing?" Mike asks, grinning wide, and without waiting for an answer he waves and adds, "Hey, Georgie! You holding down the fort over there while I'm gone?"

Georgie nods. "Uh-huh. Are you having fun on your vacation?"

"Yeah, course I am! This place is just— *hoo*, man," Mike shakes his head, like he still can't really believe he's there. "Tell you what, though, kiddo, I am getting a little homesick."

That draws an instant round of boos from the rest of them, Eddie included, and Richie of course being the loudest as he cups his hands around his mouth like he's at a fucking football stadium. Even Ben joins in, booing along with the rest of them, and he finally throws a lid on the skillet and turns the heat down to a simmer so he can come around and see the screen, too.

"Come on, man," Ben says, leaning a forearm on Bev's left shoulder. "You promised, three days *at least*, otherwise that plane ride isn't worth it."

"Hey, now, relax everyone, I never said I was coming back early," Mike says, still smiling. "Plane heads out in two days, just like we planned. This has been an awesome break, but all I'm *saying* is next time I definitely gotta take you all along with me. How's that sound? Group hiking trip through the Grand Canyon?"

"Oop, hold that thought, Mikaiel," Richie cuts him off, "we got another passenger boarding."

Sure enough, the left half of Bev's screen lights up with another *ping*, and the heavily pixelated image slowly sharpens until they're all looking at Stanley adjusting the angle of his laptop.

"Stanley!" Richie calls out, drawing it out like some kind of over-caffeinated hype man, *Stan-laaay!* He toasts him with his coffee, too. "Hola, compadre."

Stan squints at the screen, and Eddie realizes with a weird sort of jolt that Stanley's wearing *reading glasses*. Those are new; he didn't have reading glasses before, but of course he didn't, because he was *thirteen* before, and after that he was forty years old and had just unexpectedly found himself returned from the dead a thousand miles away from home. He adjusts the laptop a little more, and then once he sees that the connection's gone through, he sits back with a self-satisfied smile and says, "*There* we go! See, hon? Told you I had it."

"Didn't doubt you for a second."

Ah, Eddie thinks. That's *also* new.

The voice had come from off screen, but its owner swoops into view only a second or two later. She's still standing as she hugs Stanley from behind, loosely wrapping her arms around his neck, dropping a kiss on top of his head before settling her chin there and smiling at the camera. Stan flushes a little pink, but otherwise doesn't acknowledge the very sappy show of affection that they all would have *relentlessly* lit him up for when they were teenagers.

Or, maybe they wouldn't *all* have lit him up for it, but Richie certainly would have. When Eddie steals a quick glance at him though, he finds that, maybe not so surprisingly, Richie's got a sappy look on his face just like the rest of them, seeing Stanley comfortable and happy with someone he loves.

Back on the screen, Stanley's hands drift up to find his wife's forearms like it's second nature, his thumbs idly stroking back and forth on the sleeves of her blouse, and he says, "Everyone. This is Patty."

There's a chorus of all of them trying to say hi all at once, ranging

from a *Hi Patty* from most of them, to a *It's so nice to meet you* from Bev, and one *Buenos días Mrs. Uris* from Richie, and Georgie jumping straight into introducing himself, but it all kind of blends together into an indistinguishable cacophony.

“Wow, uh, hi, everyone,” Patty says, eyebrows raised, but her smile’s only gotten wider. Bemused, maybe.

“Okay, so here we go,” Stan says, pointing at his laptop screen. “That one’s Mike. Then there’s Bev and Ben, the little one’s Georgie — hi, Georgie — and there’s Bill, and Eddie, and that bridge troll in the back holding a coffee is Richie.”

Everyone waves when Stan says their names, even though he’s clearly jabbing his laptop screen with his finger to point to each of them in turn, and when Richie’s name is called he spreads his hands out and gives a little mock bow.

“It’s really nice to finally meet you,” Bev repeats, since the first time it sort of got lost in all the noise.

“Yeah, likewise,” Patty nods, looking at all of them while she absently plays with one of Stan’s curls, twirling it around with her fingers. “A little intimidating,” she adds, not unkindly, and Eddie takes a moment to kind of marvel at how strangely honest that is, how little effort she put into hiding the fact that she’s intimidated by meeting them. It’s almost a foreign concept to Eddie; hiding things like that is a reflex for him, something he hardly even thinks about anymore. “But it’s— nice,” she continues. “Stan’s told me a lot about all of you.”

Richie snorts. “Uh-oh.”

“Don’t worry, Trashmouth,” Stan says, “I didn’t tell her enough to make her want a preemptive restraining order yet. Figure your general *Richieness* is gonna speak for itself when we get up there.”

“Now, excuse you, I will have *you* know that—”

“You’re coming to visit?” Georgie pipes up, sounding excited enough that Richie automatically shuts up. “When?”

“Oh, yeah, of course we’re coming to visit,” Stan says, grinning at Georgie, and then he glances up at Patty.

Patty opens her mouth, hesitates, and then says, “We were thinking Friday?”

Friday. Two days from now, right around when Mike should be landing back at Bangor International. Eddie blinks, sitting back. So either they’d already been planning this, or Stan had taken his late night demand to *visit sometime soon* a lot more seriously than Eddie had expected him to.

Ben looks like Christmas came early. He beams at the laptop screen and tells them, “That’s great, guys, we can’t wait! How long do you think you’re gonna stay?”

“Well, not that long, but...” Stan starts to say, and he glances up at Patty again. Some sort of wordless conversation seems to pass between the two of them; a raised eyebrow from Stan, half a shrug from Patty and a little waving gesture at the screen, a tilted head from Stan. Then Stanley sighs and says, “Okay, yeah, guess now’s as good a time as any to announce it.”

“An *announcement*?” Richie asks, wagging his eyebrows, and Eddie knows something wildly inappropriate is coming before he even opens his mouth again. “Don’t tell me you’re finally getting that stick removed from—”

“Beep,” Bev and Bill and Stan and Eddie all say at once, while Eddie automatically reaches over to cover Georgie’s ears.

“— his *fanny*, c’mon, guys, I can keep it PG if needed.”

“Anyway,” Stan says, shaking his head as he reaches for something off screen, and there’s a slightly distorted rustling sound that Eddie figures is him thumbing through a stack of papers, maybe his mail.

Then he leans back with a single piece of paper folded in three, and he unfolds it and waves it, text facing forward, at the webcam. Eddie catches the seal of the State of Maine neatly stamped at the paper’s top edge, and when Stan holds the paper still, Eddie manages to scan

over the first line — *Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Uris, The Department of Health and Human Services of the State of Maine is pleased to* — before Bev lets out an honest-to-God *squeal* and covers her mouth with both hands.

“Stanley, oh, my *God*,” she says, and Stan lowers the letter with a smile on his face.

Just before he does, Eddie finally catches the word *adoption* written a few lines down, and his jaw drops. “Dude!”

“Yeah,” Stan says, clearly trying to stop himself from grinning ear-to-ear.

“*Dude!*” Eddie says again.

“Oh, my God,” Bev says again. “Oh, my God.”

“That’s amazing!” Ben says.

Bill shakes his head, smiling like he can’t believe it. “Guys, *wow*.”

Eddie throws his hands up and says, for the third time, “Dude!”

Richie shouts, “You guys are adopting a *kid*?”

“Probably, probably,” Stan says, waving them all down, because now Bill and Mike and Ben and Georgie are all asking questions at once. “Nobody get too excited yet—”

“Uh, *pfft*, a little late for—”

“— because it’s not quite an official approval, guys,” Stan says, raising his voice over Richie’s. “The process is usually *way* longer than this, but with the adoption agencies in Penobscot County being as overbooked as they’ve been for the last week and a half, and since I’m essentially one of the only adults on the planet that can actually relate to what all those kids just went through—”

“Present company excluded,” Richie adds with a nod in Eddie’s direction.

“Present company excluded,” Stan agrees with a nod. “They’re sort of trying to expedite the whole thing. We still have to wait until my death certificate is fully annulled, which is gonna take at least another few days, and then we have to go up there, do an in person interview, then one of their agents has to come down here and do an inspection of our place, it’s like... It’s a whole thing.”

“But we’re very optimistic,” Patty adds, squeezing Stan’s shoulders. “This initial approval was the biggest hurdle, and we’re over it.”

“Oh, my God,” Bev says again, because she’s clearly as excited as Eddie is— hell, *all* of them are. “That’s incredible!”

“Congrats, guys!” Mike shouts.

“Holy shit! Sorry, Georgie, don’t repeat that, but holy shit!” Richie says, gesturing nonsensically with his hands and definitely spilling whatever’s left of his coffee. He’s a little flushed, a smile on his face that’s not one of those thin *hey everyone look at me* smiles that he wears the most often. It’s much more reminiscent, Eddie thinks, of the look he’d gotten in the hospital when he’d recovered from the shock of seeing Eddie and then looked down to see Georgie alive for the first time in twenty-seven years. “You guys are gonna be parents! Like, you’re gonna be a mom and a dad and everything! You’re gonna be raising a whole person! Holy shit!”

“We *probably* are,” Stan corrects him. “Come on, man, don’t jinx it.”

“Oh, well if we don’t wanna *jinx* it,” Richie says, eyes widening like he thinks that’s pretty pointless but he’s willing to play along. He lifts his hands in mock surrender, the now empty coffee cup dangling from its handle hooked around his pinky, and then he mimes zipping his mouth shut with his other hand. Throws away the key and everything.

It is precisely 9:17 at night when someone bangs so loudly on the door to Eddie's guest room that he thinks, for a second, that the whole goddamn townhouse is on fire.

"What?! What? What in the fucking—"

He rips the door open and very nearly gets punched in the face.

"Jesus— *Christ*, dickhead!" Eddie shouts, having just barely managed to duck before the side of Richie's fist would have smacked squarely into his forehead. "I think I've already had enough facial injuries, *thanks*—"

"Uh, I dunno, man, *kinda* feels like this one would've been on you—"

"On *me*? How in the fuck—"

"You cut me off mid knock!"

"Mid fucking battering ram, you—" Eddie pauses, all sense knocked out of him for a second as his eyes catch on what Richie's holding in his free hand. "Is that—? What are you, a college kid? What are you doing just walking around with a handle of gin on a fucking weeknight?"

"Okay, one," Richie says, squinting and wrinkling his nose, "what the hell kind of college kid drinks top shelf gin, Eds?"

"Don't call me—"

"Two: Time is a fuckin' construct and I haven't worked a nine-to-five since I actually *was* in college, so the whole idea of a 'weeknight' means about jack to me," Richie says, giving another one of those full body shrugs, eyes wide, shoulders up to his ears before they drop. "And c, you are being a terrible host. Just terrible."

"A *host*?"

“Yeah,” Richie says, like it should be obvious. “Here I am bringing this lovely bottle of rubbing alcohol infused with pine needles, which I may remind you is *your* favorite, right to your door, and you have yet to even let me in.”

“I do not own this room, Richie. I am not a *host*,” Eddie says, which isn’t really the point, but his brain has somehow gotten stuck on Richie, for whatever reason, actually remembering what he likes to drink. So far no memories of them drinking together as kids has resurfaced, though Eddie would be fucking stunned to recall drinking *gin* as a teenager without immediately spitting it out, and as adults, he and Richie have had hard liquor around each other exactly one time and *that* ended with sizzling black tar and cicadas and gruesome baby heads popping out of the fucking fortune cookies and *guess Stanley couldn’t cut it—*

Eddie suppresses a shudder, thinks, *you’ve seen way worse than that by now, Eds, get a fucking grip*, and he crosses his arms over his chest, making a show of giving Richie a once-over from his face all the way down to his feet and back up.

There is, annoyingly, a lot of Richie to look at.

“Why are you bringing a bottle of gin to my room, anyway?”

Richie tips his head back and looks at the ceiling. “I don’t know, man, Bill took the kid out to the movies, and Mike’s in fuckin’ Arizona, and you literally could not pay me to go alone to Ben and Bev’s room, we really should establish some kind of ‘sock on the doorknob’ rule around here—”

Eddie raises a hand to cut him off. “*I meant*, dumbass, why are we drinking?”

For about half a second he sees Richie’s eyebrows lift in surprise, but then he grins wide and brandishes the bottle with a little swirl. “We’re *celebrating*, Eduardo. Stan the Man’s gonna be a dad, it would be fuckin’ heresy *not* to drink to that, don’t you think?”

“He specifically requested that we don’t jinx it,” Eddie reminds him, though he moves out of the way anyway.

“It doesn’t *matter* if we jinx it,” Richie says as he strides right up to the bed like he owns the place, twirling around when he reaches the edge of it and all but collapsing down to sit. “You know it doesn’t matter. He’s gonna get approved, it’s fuckin’ *Stan*.”

Eddie tilts his head, shrugs. He’s got a point.

And Richie, with no warning whatsoever, tosses the bottle of gin at Eddie so that Eddie’s forced to fumble with it for a second before pinning it securely to his chest. Then Richie either misses or chooses to ignore Eddie’s glare as he digs around in his back pocket with his tongue stuck out between his lips in concentration.

He pulls from his pocket, of all things, two little shot glasses, and his face is that of a man who just found a fifty dollar bill in his laundry.

Eddie balks. “Did you—? Were you carrying them around in your *pocket*?”

“Uh. Yeah? I only have so many hands, dude.”

“Oh, my God, go fucking wash them—”

“That shit’s like one eighty proof! That kills germs, doesn’t it?”

Eddie pinches the bridge of his nose, counts down from five, then says, “At *least* fucking rinse them off in the bathroom. Jesus Christ.”

Richie grumbles, but he gets up, strides past Eddie toward his bathroom — reaching out to poke Eddie’s nose as he passes, which Eddie swiftly bats down with another glare — and rinses off the shot glasses. By the time he comes back Eddie’s already situated himself sitting on the bed with his back to the headboard and the bottle of gin between his knees, and Richie takes one look at the bed and promptly flings himself bodily across the width of it, bouncing on the mattress and everything.

“God, you never progressed past fourteen, did you?”

“I grew up to be a fucking *comedian*, Eds, so obviously not—”

“Yeah, a shit comedian—”

“Good enough for your—”

“Don’t.”

Richie, turning around to lie on his back, grins wide and laughs one of his silent shoulder-shaking laughs, and then he lazily turns his head toward Eddie and holds out the two glasses cradled together in his palm. Eddie pours them each a shot.

“To Stan the Man,” Richie says, holding up his glass. “And little baby Urine.”

Eddie obligingly taps their glasses together, then says, “Sit up, dipshit. You’re gonna spill that.”

He does sit up, and they take the shot, and Richie immediately takes the bottle and pours them another round. Eddie lets the gin settle, feels it go down his esophagus with its strangely cleansing cold burn, and feels like it washes away some of the residual nervousness that’s always clinging to his spine these days. Richie leans back after their third shot, stretching across the width of the mattress with his legs dangling over the side, and Eddie shoves his toes under Richie’s back.

“It won’t be a baby,” Eddie says.

“Hm?”

“You said little baby Urine,” Eddie repeats. “But it won’t be a baby. The youngest kid brought back was three.”

“Oh, shit, right. Huh,” Richie muses, turning his head back and forth on the mattress. “Why the hell wouldn’t It go after babies?”

“Dude!”

“I’m just saying! I mean, kinda feels like an easy meal, right?”

“Oh, my God, you’re a fucking menace to society—”

They’re both laughing, though, which is *horrifying*, and Richie defends, “Come on! I mean, don’t you watch fuckin’ nature shows? That thing, whatever the fuck else it was, it was a predator, right?”

And predators are always eating eggs and baby animals and shit, it's basic fuckin' biology—"

"That is so *not* basic biology—"

"I mean, what, you think that fuckin' clown had some kind of bullshit moral code? Like, sure, a three-year-old's fuckin' fair game, but a two-year-old— woah, man, now that's crossing a *line*."

Eddie snorts, covering his face with one hand. "God, I don't know, dude. Maybe babies aren't afraid of anything."

"Have you ever *seen* a baby?" Richie asks, and then he bugs his eyes out as wide as they'll go. "Fuckin' staring at everything like it's the scariest shit they've ever seen in their lives. 'Cause, like, to be fair, it probably is. Since their lives are like, new, and everything."

"Yeah, but there's no way they're afraid of anything, like, concrete," Eddie says, and he can't believe they're sitting here only three shots deep debating how fucking Pennywise chooses its victims, but here they are. He pours himself another shot, to which Richie holds out his own glass, and they each throw their fourth back. "Babies are afraid of, like, any loud noise, but then sometimes there's a loud noise and they don't give a shit. They're weird."

"Little shits are unpredictable is what you're saying."

"Yeah, exactly. I think that's the same reason It never went after adults — well, except for us, but that's 'cause It had like, a *thing* for us after the first time," Eddie says, valiantly managing to turn his shudder into what probably comes off as a shrug. "I mean, kids are afraid of diseases and clowns and blood and fire and creepy fucking paintings, but what the hell's It gonna turn into for an adult? Tax audits?"

"Mm. Deadlines," Richie provides, more theatrically than the word *deadlines* probably warrants.

Eddie nods. "Gray hairs."

"Blind dates."

“Weird moles.”

Richie drops his voice an octave, adopts some weird accent Eddie can't place, and says, “The inevitable march of time!”

“The mortifying ordeal of being known,” Eddie counters, because he thinks he read that somewhere once, and it feels like it fits.

Richie hums in agreement to that, twirling the shot glass around and around and around between his fingers. He doesn't offer another example of something adults are afraid of, and there's something in the way he's staring up absently up at the ceiling that doesn't sit right with Eddie, something about the crease in his forehead and the way he looks like he's chewing on his cheek. He gulps, Eddie sees it, sees the bob of his Adam's apple because of the way he's lying on the bed with his head back, and Eddie finds himself stuck staring at it for a second.

“Shit, that's right,” Richie says, presumably to himself before he turns and raises an eyebrow at Eddie. “Is it weird that I forget sometimes?”

“Huh? No, why would—? We *all* forgot.”

“No, no, not that,” Richie says, returning to staring up at the ceiling. “I forget you guys know about— y'know. About me. I told you guys, what, like a week ago? I'm just...” He takes a slow breath, raspberries his lips as he blows it out. “Just not used to it... being out there, I guess.”

Oh. Right.

Right.

Eddie frowns, fiddles with his own shot glass for a second, and asks, “What, you never told anyone before you told us?”

Richie squints up at the ceiling. “Well, I mean... pretty sure the one dude I hooked up with in college must have figured it out, like, somewhere between us making out and...” he trails off. Eddie very determinedly does not try to imagine what the *and* there entails, and he feels heat rising to his face anyway. “But no, never told anyone.”

Eddie's frown deepens, and he barely resists the urge to reach out and give Richie's arm a sympathetic squeeze. "No one at all?"

"No, no one, man. That was the whole... I fuckin' *couldn't*, you know? This stupid shitty town just—" Richie sticks his tongue out and makes a fart noise, motions with one hand like he's chopping something in front of him— "slammed a wall over it."

"This town?"

"Fucking *Derry*," Richie huffs, rolling his eyes, and Eddie has no idea whether Richie's blaming Derry itself for the loss of all their memories and he's saying he actually *forgot* he was gay, or if he's just referring to Derry being... well, *Derry*. The epitome of conservative rural Maine. Home to people like Henry Bowers, home to some truly stomach-turning graffiti on the kissing bridge, home to whoever threw Adrian off that same bridge and directly into Its path already looking like he'd been through a fucking meat grinder.

Richie doesn't clarify, though, and Eddie doesn't know how to ask.

Instead, he fills up his shot glass again, and at the sound of glass clinking Richie turns to look at him, breaks out of that thousand-yard-stare, and smirks before holding out his own glass for another.

They throw back that one, their fifth, which Richie does not sit up for, despite Eddie poking him in the side with his foot in a clear message of *get the hell up before you choke on that, you fucking moron*, and Richie does actually pretend to choke on it for a second just to fuck with him, which only ends up making a bunch of it gurgle over the side of his mouth.

"You're a fucking *child*, dicknuts."

Richie echoes, "*dicknuts*," and grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it all the way up to wipe his face, in the process revealing a long stretch of pale stomach and a bit of hair around his waistband and a few yellowish afterimages of bruises, no doubt remnants from the fight against Pennywise.

It occurs to Eddie for the second time that there is, annoyingly, a *lot*

of Richie to look at.

Before he can dwell on that Richie pulls his shirt back down, lets out a contented sigh, and says, "We're gonna be *uncles*, Eds."

Eddie sticks his cold toes under Richie's back again. "That poor kid."

Richie laughs, soft and quiet, his face flushed from the alcohol. "Yeah, right? Poor fuckin' kid doesn't know what he's in for."

"Or she."

"Or what *she's* in for, holy shit, can you imagine Stanley raising a girl?"

Eddie shrugs one shoulder. He's not sure what the difference is. A kid's a kid. He shifts around on the bed so he's not quite sitting up ramrod straight against the headboard anymore, slouching and kicking his legs over Richie's waist. He reclines back against the pillows, cradling the gin bottle against his side so that Richie can still reach it if he wants. Richie doesn't go for it, though, and instead he abandons the shot glass he'd been twirling around between his fingers, setting it down beside him and laying both hands on Eddie's shin, tapping out an idle rhythm with his thumbs.

"Sort of feels like we already are uncles, though," Eddie says. "What with Georgie."

"What? Nah, come on, Georgie's not our *nephew*, he's our friend's *brother*."

"What's the difference?"

Richie opens his mouth to answer, hesitates, and then shrugs. "Closer, I guess? Less steps removed? I dunno, kinda makes him feel like our little brother, too, y'know? But no, yeah, I guess there isn't really a difference. Guess it is kind of like we're his uncles. But like... this other kid is gonna call me fuckin' *Uncle Richie*."

"Yeah?"

"Probably? I dunno, man," Richie shrugs again. "I'd be *Uncle Richie*."

What the fuck even is that? I mean, is that fuckin' wild or what?"

Eddie imagines some nameless faceless kid calling him *Uncle Eddie*, and he admits, "It is kind of wild, yeah."

"*Uncle Richie*," Richie mutters to himself, like he's trying out the sound of it. "I never even, like, *hung out* with a kid, not 'til Georgie, you know that?"

"No?"

"Nope," Richie says, popping the *p*.

And for some reason Eddie hadn't expected that, mostly because of how effortlessly Richie gets along with Georgie, how he slides into the pseudo-uncle role without even having to think about it. But really, of course Eddie wouldn't have *known*. Not for sure.

There are so many things about Richie he doesn't know anymore, so many gaps that need filling.

"Seriously?" he finds himself asking. "Never?"

"Uh, yeah? When would I have hung out with any kids, man? Not like I got a bigass family or anything," Richie says, turning to raise an eyebrow at Eddie. "Why, I mean, *you* got a ton of experience with kids I don't know about?"

Eddie shrugs. He really doesn't. In the last decade or so — other than, of course, Vicky and Dean and Mattie and Georgie and all the others that he and Stan led from that cave — Eddie's only interacted with kids in the casual sort of way that someone living in a massively populated place like Manhattan can't quite avoid. Babies staring at him from their parent's arms, toddlers making faces and playing games on the subway, his coworkers' kids coming into the office on days when school's out. That sort of thing.

He thinks of bringing that up. He thinks of telling Richie, *yeah, sometimes kids will stare at me in like the grocery line or whatever, you know how kids do, and I'll always stick my tongue out at them or do something else stupid to get a smile out of them.*

Instead what comes out is, “Not really, no.”

“What about like, *having* them? Never thought about it?”

“Uh... No, we... Myra never liked them.”

Richie turns his head toward him and after a beat asks, “So?”

“The fuck you mean, *so*?” Eddie says, throwing his hands up. “So I was married to her for sixteen years, dipshit.”

“Yeah, and that wasn’t my question, *Spaghetti*,” Richie says in the exact same tone that Eddie said *dipshit*, flicking him in the knee. His other hand remains on his ankle, thumb sweeping back and forth like he’d done that first night Eddie came back, when Eddie conked out on the couch at the Derry Town House surrounded by all the losers. Richie doesn’t even seem to realize he’s doing it. “I asked if *you* ever thought about having kids.”

Eddie opens his mouth, then shuts it, and then he huffs a sigh and leans his head back, eyes up on the ceiling. “I never really... I mean, kids are— scary.”

Richie snorts. “Scarier than a killer clown?”

“Fuck off, I don’t mean *that* kind of scary, dickhead,” Eddie rolls his eyes. “I mean, like...”

He trails off, struggling to put words a concept that feels very solid and real and *there* in his mind but that, once it’s finally left his mind, he can’t help worrying will come out sounding wrong or, worse, utterly ridiculous.

That might be blamed on the alcohol, but then again Eddie’s pretty sure he’s just like this.

“Kids get sick,” is what he finally finds himself saying. “They get sick, and they get hurt, and they fucking *die* sometimes.”

And they break their arms, his brain oh so helpfully supplies, and they get the shit kicked out of them by bigger kids and they fall in love with other kids and get their hearts broken over and over and over again, and

they think they're invincible but they're not, and they ride their bikes without fucking helmets, Richie! No helmets, riding without touching the fucking handlebars! What the hell was wrong with us? What were we thinking?

He shakes the thought away. "I can't— I'm enough of a fucking mess already, you know that. Feels like if I ever had an actual kid that was like, *my kid*, I'd just— Jesus, I'd have ended up hospitalized for the anxiety attacks by the time the kid hit their first birthday. Or worse, I'd take all that shit out on *them* and never let them have like, an actual life, and I'd just end up fucking them up worse than... you know. Worse than I was."

He leaves that thought hanging there, unwilling and unable to fully articulate it. Richie gets it. He always got it, always knew how much Eddie struggled with the balance between loving his mother because she *loved* him and she was his *mother* and she only acted the way she did because she *cared* and— well. And not loving her so much. Not loving the way he had to live under her roof.

And suddenly, unbidden, another memory digs its way up from the depths of his subconscious. The tree in his front lawn back home, the creaking of the high-up branches, the sliding of his window, Richie tumbling inside with all the grace of a newborn fucking giraffe, the harsh whispers and the stifled laughter, a flashlight on comic books under the covers. They'd sit together exactly like this sometimes, Eddie's legs thrown over Richie's waist. Two tiny versions of themselves, separated by nearly three decades of life and aging and wear and tear, and here they are, right back where they started like nothing's changed at all.

Which isn't true, obviously. A whole hell of a lot has changed between then and now, but something about the consistency is... comforting, Eddie thinks.

"You wouldn't fuck 'em up, Eds."

Eddie blinks, thrown from his reverie, and his brow furrows as he shoots a look over at Richie. "Huh?"

"You wouldn't fuck them up," Richie repeats. "You're not... You're

not *like* that, man.”

Eddie feels the disbelief showing on his face. He can't help it. “You're seriously gonna tell me I'm not an anxious fucking nutcase, Trashmouth?”

“Now, now, honey, I never said *that*,” Richie says, smirking at him, but the smile turns genuine and soft after only a second, his eyes behind the glasses equally soft and a little drunkenly glazed and centered on Eddie. “But I mean, like... come on, I don't see you rolling Georgie up in bubble wrap yet. You're already way ahead of the curve there, dude.”

Eddie hesitates, then quietly admits, “I've honestly thought about it.”

That gets him a full body laugh, Richie throwing his head back and lifting his legs into the air for a moment as he scrunches up his face and lets off a series of very unattractive snorts. “Holy shit, dude, I would probably die if I fuckin' saw that. Get him looking like that kid from the Christmas Story, all—” he puffs up his cheeks and holds his arms out like he's wearing a ridiculously thick layered coat, then dissolves into giggles again— “Oh, my God. Fuckin' comedy gold.”

“Can you blame me? Mike literally *throws* him sometimes.”

“Yeah, into the *couch*.”

“The couch is not a fucking pile of cotton, dude, there's a *frame*, and all kinds of pointy bits he could land on, and—”

“Oh, my God, you're actually gonna roll that kid up in bubble wrap, aren't you?”

“No, fucking obviously not. But... well, maybe the couch.”

Richie snorts again, smiling so wide that it looks like it's hurting his cheeks, and then he rubs both hands over his face, up and down and up and down. “Oh, man, that's funny,” he murmurs, settling his hands back on Eddie's leg, and then, “But like, seriously, man. For real. You worry about *way* too much, yeah, and you drive me up a fuckin' wall on the best of days, but you're not that fucked up. You were never... You know. Never like your mom was.”

And Eddie...

Huh. Eddie can't really say anything to that. He's a little too stunned at Richie saying the words *your mom* without immediately following it up with a shitty punchline, for one thing.

Richie, in classic Richie fashion, keeps talking anyway. "I'm not saying, like, go out right fuckin' now and knock up the first lucky lady you can find, 'cause like... yeah, no. What I'm saying is you're— You don't have to worry about being like that, because you're *not* like that, Eds. You were never like that, not like she was. You just..." Richie goes quiet for a moment. The staccato beat he's tapping out on Eddie's shin takes up a manic quality for a second before his hands go still, and he takes a slow breath. "I dunno. You were always looking out for us, Eds. You still are."

His hands don't move from Eddie's leg, fingers now idly drawing patterns on Eddie's ankle through the fabric of his pajama pants. And they're lying here pressed close in Eddie's bed like they used to when they were kids, and Richie just quietly and unthinkingly laid a balm over one of Eddie's worst fears with just a few self-assured words, and Eddie has no way of knowing what's going through Richie's head now as he stares up at the ceiling, but he just said *you drive me up a wall on the best of days* and *you're always looking out for us* and, oddly, *the first lucky lady you can find*, and Eddie is five or six ill-advised shots of 180-proof liquor deep and feeling the flush of it creep up into his cheeks, and...

And a thought occurs to him, then.

He's staring blankly at Richie, eyes drawn to his Adam's apple again, up the curve of his throat to the angle of his jawline shaded with what's crept well past five-o'clock shadow at this point, and really, it's not even a fully formed thought. It's just an inkling, an urge, a slight tug at his brain.

It may not even be the first time this thought has crossed his mind, for all he knows of his teenage years, but if it's not, it's certainly the first time he *remembers* it crossing his mind, and it's jarring enough that his immediate thought afterward is, *Oh, no, nope, back that up, Eds. Back that waaay up.*

Eddie clears his throat and all but physically shakes himself out of it. He abruptly pulls his legs off from over Richie, scooting back to sit cross-legged with the excuse of unscrewing the bottle again.

If Richie notices his sudden nervousness — and of course he does, how could he not, when does Richie ever *not* notice when something's up with him — he very graciously does not mention it, and instead holds his glass out for another shot.

The following day is a fairly uneventful Thursday, followed by an equally uneventful Friday.

It's Eddie's turn to skirt around Richie, though he thinks he does a fair better job of being subtle about it. And he's not, like, *avoiding* him, he's just— got shit to do, like make phone calls to divorce lawyers and put in a request for even more time off at work and aimlessly browse real estate websites for apartments in all kinds of places that he knows he'll never move to.

Sue him.

On Friday morning, he runs his longest run since coming back from the dead: six and a half miles, though he has no idea what his time was and he frankly doesn't care to know.

It helps. In general. The endorphins, the adrenaline, the feeling of almost *too* much air in his lungs as his shoes keep on hitting the pavement, it helps.

He gets back to the townhouse flushed and out of breath and fucking

starving, and he and Ben and Georgie sit around the kitchen island and demolish a late morning breakfast buffet. Ben types away on some work thing on his laptop, Georgie reads a book that Bill bought him, and Eddie chugs about half a jug of orange juice before heading up for a shower.

Richie doesn't wake up until noon, and when he does, he and Bev almost immediately go out to, quote, "have a girl's day." Richie's words, not Bev's. For the remainder of the afternoon, Ben keeps working remotely from the kitchen island, twirling a pen and jotting down notes and sketches on a yellow notepad, little shapes and chicken scratch that Eddie couldn't even begin to decipher if he wanted to. Bill curls up on the armchair in the living room with his laptop and does not move for several hours, sometimes muttering something under his breath or taking off his reading glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose, only occasionally glancing up to ask whoever happens to be in the room at the time seemingly random questions like, *Do any of you know how much a loaf of bread would have cost in the forties?*

Meanwhile, Stan updates them via group chat on his and Patty's progress up the East Coast — they left at seven in the morning Thursday, stayed in a hotel off the Jersey Turnpike overnight, and picked up the second half of the trip today rather than repeating Stan's caffeine-and-anxiety fueled twenty hour nonstop drive from last week.

The day passes like trickling molasses, pleasant and slow. And then, all at once and before Eddie knows it, Mike's plane is scheduled to land at Bangor International, and Bill rides out to pick him up, and Richie and Bev return to the townhouse slurping smoothies and with their arms laden with bags from God-only-knows-where, and the Escalade comes rolling up the driveway. All in the same half hour.

It is horrendously chaotic, and loud, and an absolute mess, and—

And a little bit perfect, in a way that Eddie can't exactly place. Perfect, the way things always seem to be when all seven of them are under one roof.

Eddie's nerves are a far-off and insignificant thing in the face of all

this: In the face of Stanley, alive and whole and smiling wide, bending down as soon as he clears the doorway and scooping Georgie up into his arms. In the face of Patty, a woman who instantly seems an almost *preternaturally* perfect complement to the person Stanley grew up to be, gently introducing herself to Georgie and then accepting hugs from all of them, along with one dramatic bow and kiss on the back of the head from Richie. In the face of Bev, excitedly and immediately dragging Patty away from the boys to give her the grand tour of the townhouse, linking their arms together like they've known each other for years.

And then of course there's Mike.

Mike, who until today has never quite known the concept of *coming home*, given that he'd gone his entire life without ever leaving it in the first place. Mike, who never left home but whose home left *him* instead, bit by bit, scattered across the country and well out of his reach over the course of a few years. Mike, who's never returned from a trip to then walk into a house that's full to bursting with people he loves, all of whom pretty much start *screaming* over each other like a bunch of hyperactive children the second he walks in the door.

He definitely gets a little choked up over it.

None of them really *see* him getting choked up over it, though, since he's enveloped in a hug from Stanley almost immediately, both of them clinging tight to each other while Mike tucks his face down into Stan's shoulder. Then Ben comes up and hugs the both of them together, and Bill joins in, and Eddie can't exactly *not* get in on it after that, and then he feels Georgie hugging both his and Bill's legs together, too.

Finally Richie flings himself into the mix, long arms wrapped around all of them as he starts putting on what is apparently his *grandma* voice and kissing both Mike and Stanley on their heads over and over and over again, complete with the *mwah* sound and everything, until the two of them are laughing enough that they can pull apart and pretend to blame the shine in their eyes on Richie's antics.

Eddie steps back, surreptitiously makes sure his own eyes are dry,

too, and then he takes it upon himself to ferry everyone out of the tiny foyer and over to Ben's absolutely gigantic living room, because yes, Stan and Patty and Mike are all gonna need to go to bed soon anyway, but in the meantime they can relax and stop crowding the foyer and stepping on each other's toes like a bunch of idiots.

And as he looks around at everyone gathering together on Ben's L-shaped couch, all smiles and laughter and ruffled hair and side-hugs and cheek kisses, he thinks, not for the first time — though it may be the first time he really believes it — that Richie might have been onto something.

This place really is the Losers' Clubhouse 2.0, isn't it?

Here's the thing, though.

The *thing*, about having all your childhood memories wiped from your brain for two and a half decades, and consequently forgetting that all your neuroses and hypochondriac tendencies were the product of subpar parenting and a downright *masterful* act of gaslighting rather than actual genuine *fragility* and then, in the course of a week, rediscovering those memories and realizing that the fragility was never really there to begin with and then promptly getting yourself *skewered by a murder clown from space* and then waking up alive again the next day—

Well. The thing is, that doesn't just make those neuroses *go away*.

Take, for instance: Today.

It is a perfectly normal Saturday morning at the townhouse unofficially dubbed the Losers Clubhouse 2.0, and although most of them are asleep, every single one of them is under the same roof for the first time since that day after the Waking, for the first time ever without the cloud of *Stan's wife doesn't know he's alive* and *Eddie still has to go back to New York* and various other loose ends hanging over them, and everything is perfectly one-hundred-percent fine.

And Eddie can't breathe anyway.

His inhaler, for better or for worse, is at present a mangled lump of molten plastic at the bottom of an underground cave. It has *been* a mangled lump of molten plastic at the bottom of an underground cave for over a week now.

This is not news. Eddie tossed it into the fire himself and watched it burn.

He knows his inhaler is a useless piece of junk far out of his reach, and he knows that it was always a useless piece of junk, really, even when it was fresh out of the pharmacy bag, even when it sat intact and solid and reassuring in his jacket pocket, even when he pumped the whatever-the-fuck-it-really-was down his throat and felt his breath stuttering back into a healthy rhythm. It was a fake, a coping mechanism for asthma attacks that were never really asthma attacks, a placebo to soothe what he'd never known were actually, *technically* anxiety attacks.

Oh, he *needs* his inhaler. Fuck.

Because the first thing his brain tells him, as his lungs constrict and his breath stalls in his throat and he stumbles his way out of the kitchen and into the nearest bathroom for a second of privacy — no one was around, not yet, not this early in the morning, but it's only a matter of time with so many of them essentially living under the same roof and he can't let any of them see him like this but *especially* not Georgie — is the age old thought of *you're having an asthma attack, Eddie*.

It is, bizarrely, an almost comforting thought.

You're having an asthma attack, Eddie, is familiar and simple and fixable. It's a light on his dashboard, clear and precise, with a definable solution.

But then his next thought, as he fumbles in his pockets for an inhaler that's not there and then throws open the medicine cabinet on nothing but pure muscle memory, is *wait, dumbass, you don't have fucking asthma*, but even when he remembers that fun little fact the heart palpitations don't stop, and his breath doesn't return to anything close to normal, and he thinks *what if it's a heart attack oh shit shit shit and you just locked yourself in the bathroom and no one can get to you and no one even knows anything's wrong so they won't think to call an ambulance or anything—*

The medicine cabinet's basically empty. It's just Band-Aids and Q-tips and Neosporin and Kotex and—

Oh, he really can't breathe. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Eddie folds his hands over the top of the faucet and drops his forehead onto his laced fingers, closing his eyes and trying to catch his breath. He can hear it echoing on the surface of the sink, great heaving gasps that sure as fuck *sound* like they should be bringing some air in, but his lungs seem to be putting in a different vote.

Come on, Eds. In and out.

Not so fast, come on.

Heart attack. Thirty percent, maybe forty. He's young and relatively fit and there's no pain or discomfort in his arm or his shoulder but then again he technically can't feel his limbs well enough to know that—

There are loads of other things that could be wrong with him, he knows, pulmonary embolism or cardiomyopathy or a collapsed lung — *were one of your lungs pierced when you died it had to have been pierced right you were fucking impaled and it was only a matter of time before something went south, Eddie, how could you have been so naive to think it would just go away* — and none of his breath feels like enough, and his heart feels like it's going to burst like a fucking water balloon

in his chest, like it'll just grow and grow and grow and it'll press up against his ribcage like the balloon pressing up on those fucking stalagmites under Neibolt and then the pressure will get to be too much and then it'll just—

Someone knocks on the door.

“Eddie?”

“I— I— can't—” Eddie struggles to form some kind of coherent sentence, fails at that, and then somehow manages to twist at the waist and flail one arm out to smack the doorknob until it unlocks. It's one of those locks that comes undone as soon as you open the door from the inside, so all it takes is a few clumsy swipes and the door opens with an anticlimactic *tick*.

Eddie lets his back hit the sink vanity, and the floor rises to meet his descent until he's sitting with his legs sprawled in front of him, and before he knows it, Bill's sunk down to one knee in front of him, ducking down so that his face ends up right in Eddie's line of sight.

Bill's... talking? Maybe? His mouth is moving, and he looks scared, and he's—

Oh. He's breathing. Slowly, like he wants Eddie to—

Oh.

Oh, right.

Okay.

Bill's got one hand up, like it's raised in surrender or maybe like he'd reached out for Eddie and froze halfway through the movement, but his other hand is palm up in front of his own chest, rising as Bill breathes in and his shoulders lift. Slow, even. Eddie tries to mimic him and fails, gasps and heaves and shakes his head — he can't *fucking* do it — but Bill just does it again. Slow, even, one hand lifting up with his shoulders, and then he turns his palm down and lowers his hand with the exhale.

It takes more than one try. It might take or five or six or fucking

twenty, Eddie has no idea, but Bill keeps doing it anyway, keeps miming for Eddie to breathe no matter how many times Eddie fails at it, and eventually, finally, he manages to suck in something that might be close to a healthy breath.

Bill doesn't stop there. He keeps it up, stays with Eddie and keeps miming what a normal fucking breathing human being is supposed to look like, and Eddie tries to shove aside any thoughts that are not, explicitly and solely, *do what he's doing*.

"Th — th — that's it," Bill's saying. "Just b — buh — *breathe* with me, okay?"

Eddie's heart is still fucking *racing*, and he's sitting on the floor of a bathroom probably looking like an absolute maniac, and every inhale comes in a little too shaky and too much all at once, like the air's too cold, but fuck, at least he's not fucking dead—

Oh, no, no, nope, he tells himself. *Let's not let that train of thought go any further, yeah?*

He breathes, and Bill breathes, and Eddie's heart slows down a bit until there's just an ache in his chest, like a muscle cramp, like his heart had been working too hard and finally gave in and stopped slamming relentlessly into his ribs, but the leftover hurt's still there and it won't be going away for a long long while.

"That's it," Bill says again, quieter. It was always easier for him to get his words out when he said it under his breath, or when he shouted it loud enough for the entire school to hear, Eddie remembers that. It was always the in between that tripped him up. "That's it."

Eddie reaches both hands up to run over his face, then drops them again because his arms feel like lead weights. He squeezes his eyes shut until stars burst in the black behind his eyelids.

"*Fuck.*"

"It's okay."

"I know, just—" Eddie's panting like he's in the middle of a run, at the part of a run that he never likes, the part where he's considering

giving up and walking from here on out but he knows that the runner's high is only a few sneaker beats away. There's no runner's high coming now, though. "Just... *fuck*."

"Eddie, c – can I...?"

Bill doesn't even have to finish the question. Eddie opens his eyes to see him reaching out, tentative, like Eddie's some kind of spooked animal, and with an instinct that's been ingrained deep within him for three decades, an instinct that puts some kind of aura around Bill and only Bill, Eddie thinks *fuck it* and leans forward and wraps his arms like a vice around Bill's middle.

Distantly he thinks it's a little funny — not like, *ha ha* funny, but funny — that Bill ended up being shorter than him. Big Bill, who always seemed twice as tall as any of them, their leader, the whole group's *de facto* big brother, Eddie's first best friend from the days in which he'd only barely understood what a best friend was supposed to be. But it's easy, now, with Bill up on one knee and Eddie sat with his butt on the tile floor, to bury his face in the dip of Bill's shoulder and pretend that they're little kids again.

They're thirteen and Eddie's desperately trying to make him feel even a tiny bit better after Georgie's officially been missing for a month. They're fourteen and screaming their heads off in Neibolt, hugging because they're both terrified and convinced they're about to die. They're fifteen and clinging to each other for as long as they can and Eddie's saying *don't forget us okay* before Bill finally gets into the moving truck with his parents.

Or they're forty-one, and Eddie's just come down from what he is belatedly recognizing as a panic attack, and Bill's arms are secure around his shoulders, one hand on the back of Eddie's head, holding onto Eddie just as tight as Eddie's holding on to him.

"You scared me for a s – second there."

"Mm," Eddie mumbles into his shoulder. "Sorry."

"No, it's—" Bill stops. "I g – get them, too. Used to all the time, especially after— after Georgie. I'd, um... I'd be thinking about him,

you know, wondering where he went, and I'd have all these t- t-
tuh — *terrible* thoughts about what could've happened to him, and
then before I knew it..."

"Couldn't breathe," Eddie finishes for him, his voice hoarse. "Thought
it was an asthma attack."

Bill gives him another squeeze. "Yeah."

And it's only now that Eddie starts to remember the spiral of anxiety
that had led him to breaking down in the bathroom, the thoughts
that had swirled around in his head as he made himself coffee in the
quiet townhouse kitchen, so many things to agonize over that he
can't even begin to parse out which one ended up being the trigger.

His death, the fact that he's alive again and he doesn't know *how*, the
fact that he's alive again and he's still not sure if he believes that he's
going to *keep* being alive again — can't tell Bill that, God, of *all*
people he can't tell Bill that — and then there's the mundane shit, the
divorce, his job that he still hasn't gone back to and the vacation days
that are rapidly dwindling as he putzes around four states away, the
weird new-but-not-new twingey feeling he gets whenever he's around
Richie anymore, which, shit, he's not touching *that* thought with a
ten-foot-pole for a long fucking while, thanks, and then of course
there's the fact that he has absolutely no idea where he's going after
he finally leaves this townhouse, where he's going to live, what he's
going to *do*—

You're spiraling again.

Just focus on this, Kaspbrak.

He's alive, and he's (probably) safe, and he's (relatively) healthy. And
his friends, the people he loves more than anything else on this entire
fucking planet, the people he *died* for, are all alive and safe and
healthy, too.

Eddie forces another breath and tightens his fists on the sides of Bill's
shirt. He breathes in the smell of laundry detergent and Old Spice
aftershave, lets that and Bill's gentle hand on his back anchor him
back down, and he thinks, *Yeah, okay. One day at a time.*

Notes for the Chapter:

i think. i think chapter 4 might end it. i really think it really might be the end oh my god there really will be an end to this and it's COMING--

4. and we'll be alright, revolution lover

Notes for the Chapter:

why must a fic have a "plot"? is it not enough to write my favorite characters finding happiness together, in whatever way i choose, in scenes strung together in a caffeine-fueled frenzy?

also i love that the last chapter was like 14k and this one's pushing 30k, i swear to god i have never once been consistent or concise in my entire life

warnings for this chapter:

- some mild ptsd symptoms (because like, duh)
- a nongraphic mention of adrian's (since reversed) death
- one (1) sex scene. if you want to skip, it builds up slowly (again, i have never been concise in my life), so just duck out whenever it gets heavier than you like, and then ctrl+f "shifts" and there's no more smut after that, pinky promise

anyway. anyway. here we go, kids, we made it. gay rights

In Eddie's mind, the list of things exacerbating his anxiety lately can be compiled, in order, as follows:

1. His death and his subsequent resurrection. Yeah. That one's not moving from the top spot any time soon.
2. Richie. This was much lower on the list, it could have been brushed off as a one-time fleeting thought, a result of alcohol clouding his judgement— everyone has thoughts they don't actually mean, right? Except. *Except*, more memories keep ramming themselves into his frontal lobe in an onslaught that,

if nothing else, makes it very clear that it was neither a one-time thought nor an even *uncommon* one. (Richie tangled up with him in Eddie's bed, Richie letting Eddie yank him into a photo booth, Richie turning to him after every shitty joke, Richie pinching his cheeks and teasing him, *cute cute cute!*) Over and over and over again, Richie, Richie, Richie. It's fucking relentless.

3. His job. He has exactly six vacation days left before he either has to go back to New York or quit the position he's worked in for *eighteen years*, and then where the hell would that leave him, huh? What the fuck is he supposed to do then?
4. Where the fuck is he gonna *live*? He knows he's always got a place to stay in Maine, but for God's sake, he's a grown man and he *needs* his own place. What if he does go back to New York? What then? Myra's got the apartment! Manhattan is not fucking cheap!
5. Lastly, the divorce. This one is remarkably unpleasant, and Eddie's probably going to be paying alimony for the rest of his fucking life, but hey, at least he's got Bev to commiserate with on this one front. It deserves the bottom slot in the list for that reason alone.

So, on Saturday morning, after his minor panic attack in the townhouse bathroom (after which he is *definitely fine, Bill, please stop asking*), Eddie sits down in bed with his laptop and does a cursory Google search for therapists. He searches the greater Bangor area, then Manhattan, and then — in a brief lapse of sanity — Los Angeles.

He scrolls through the latter results for a grand total of thirty seconds before snapping his laptop shut, looking around his empty guest bedroom as if someone's watching, peering over his shoulder, as if they're gonna know where his mind just went.

Los fucking Angeles. Jesus Christ.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

“This is like eighth grade all over again, isn’t it?”

Richie looks up; he’s been busy staring down at his shoes, lightly kicking the mulch beneath him, not quite enough to get any real air but enough to get him swinging. When he does look up, Bev’s still sitting in the swing next to him, except now she’s holding her cigarette out in his direction.

“Oh, shit, *right*,” Richie says, laughing as he takes it from her. He barely ever smokes anymore, but for old time’s sake he pops it into his mouth with his lips curled in like he’s smoking a joint, and then he mimes an air guitar and, with the cigarette dangling from his lips, sings a barely properly enunciated, “*Smokin’ in the boys’ room!*”

Bev laughs, kicking her swing back.

“God,” Richie says, pulling out the cigarette and flicking the ash away, “could we have been any more fuckin’ typical? Swapping cigarettes in the bathroom?”

“And under the bleachers,” Bev reminds him.

“That is way fuckin’ worse, thanks.”

As he hands it back to her, she digs her heels into the ground to steady herself and takes a slow inhale, letting her shoulders relax as she blows the smoke out in a steady stream. Then she says, “Well, if I remember right, the boys room was our favorite place to go, wasn’t it? It was just about the only place I could get away from Greta Bowie and all her... friends.”

“Oh, is *that* what we’re calling them now.”

“And what would you call them, Rich?”

Richie shuffles his feet along the ground to tip himself as far back as he can, and he lets the swing fly. “I dunno. Minions? Lackeys? Demon spawn?”

A giggle. “Richie!”

“What?” Richie asks, as she holds the cigarette out to him again, shaking her head with a rueful smile on her face. Richie manages to catch it on his backswing. “Fuckin’ hated those girls, man.”

“Richie, they were fourteen years old.”

“As was I, so I believe I am well within my rights to hate them.”

Bev tilts her head. “Fair.”

He lets the swing peter out on its own, pulling his feet up and everything so it rocks back and forth to its natural stop, slow and steady. It’s a nice day out — they’ve all been nice days, really, the kind of days that August is chock full of when you’re as far north as the middle of Maine. The kind of days Richie had forgotten about along with everything else, mid seventies and breezy. But there’s something about it right *now*, Richie thinks, on this Saturday evening with the sun setting through big old poofy clouds in the distance, half the sky flushed orange, that makes the day especially nice.

They’ve just finished running some *painfully* boring grown-up errands, from the post office to the Penobscot County records office to the grocery store and then to the strip mall just outside of town.

But sitting here in this mostly abandoned park, they might as well be fourteen years old again. Not a responsibility to be found.

“I guess it’s not *exactly* like eighth grade, though, is it?” Bev eventually concedes, and Richie hands the cigarette back. “I don’t have to hide from Greta anymore, for one thing.”

You don’t have to hide from anyone anymore, Richie thinks but doesn’t

say, thinking simultaneously of Bev's faceless piece of crap ex-husband and snot-nosed fourteen-year-old Greta and the clown — or, well, the *idea* of the clown, anyway, since that's always how he tries to think of It now, from a distance, as an idea and not as something that actually *happened*. It's a black spot in his brain, something he knows is there but treats as an abstract.

Better for his sanity that way.

He shakes the thought away and says, "Well, yeah, *that*, and back in the good ol' days, I could hang out in a playground without risk of a cop taking one look at my creepy forty-year-old ass and tossing me in a fuckin' holding cell."

Bev snort laughs, which is still probably one of the most adorable things Richie has ever heard in his life. Top five, for sure. She only does it when he catches her off guard, when she feels safe and content and he's managed to startle a laugh out of her on top of it, and every time it's a shot of endorphins straight to the center of his chest.

Maybe it's the standard narcissism, that swell of pride he gets from making anyone laugh. But maybe it's because he knows, somehow, that Bev didn't get the chance to do a whole lot of snort laughing in the last twenty-seven years.

"Yeah, laugh it up, Marsh, but this fine city... probably? Employs a decently competent police force? Better than Derry, anyway, and I for one would lock my own ass up in an instant, so..." Richie trails off, shrugging with both hands turned up before he lets them drop. "*Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars!*"

Bev's shaking her head, still smiling as she hands the cigarette back.

"So..." Richie says, taking a quick puff and then shimmying his shoulders and adopting his best Teenage Girl Voice. "Who do you *liiike*? C'mon, Beverly, we're all girls here."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly tell," Bev sighs, wistful, kicking her swing back again. "It's a secret, Richie."

"Is it though?" Richie asks, wrinkling his nose, and Bev's grinning as he hands the cigarette back, as she takes a puff. She doesn't answer with the obvious *no*, so Richie sighs, "Could be worse, I guess. Least you two aren't walking around calling each other fuckin' *babylove*."

Bev snorts again.

"Babylove! Fucking *babylove*! I swear Staniel is not living that down for as long as I live."

"Oh, I'm sure he would expect nothing less, Richie."

"I do have a reputation to maintain, my dear Beverly," Richie sighs. "Seriously, though, it's not like you guys are any better. You two are so grossly in love it *kind* of makes me physically ill, but like... I don't know, it's better than the pining, I guess. Finally got your heads out of your asses and figured out you were crazy about each other. About fuckin' time."

"Yeah?"

"*Fuck*, yeah. If I had to see Haystack making goo goo eyes at you from across the room one more time I was gonna fuckin' lose it. Or just... smush you two together by force. I dunno."

"The memory loss set us back a bit," Bev reminds him. "But we got there. In the end."

"Hm. With a slight detour through Big Bill, if I'm not mistaken?"

Bev flushes a deep red across her cheekbones, but she gives a theatrical wince and sucks in a breath through her teeth. "Not... my proudest moment, but in my defense—"

"— he's cute as hell? Oh, agreed, I'm not judging at all. A girl can get *lost* in those baby blues, huh?"

"I was *going* to say I remember having a crush on him when we were kids," Bev corrects, rolling her eyes at Richie in that fond way she does sometimes. "All those memories coming back in all the wrong order... I guess I made a connection that wasn't really there, or— maybe the connection was there, but it wasn't... *exactly* the one I was

looking for.”

“Eh,” Richie shrugs. “Don’t feel too bad. One way or another, we all had childhood crushes on Bill. It’s like a Losers’ Club right of passage or something.”

“Was it?”

“Oh, yeah,” Richie says.

Richie might be a little biased, but it’s no less true. Bill always had that sort of *gravitas*, the charisma, and in the middle of his muddled memories Richie has one image poking through the fog a little clearer now — Bill, pedaling Silver as hard as he could, leaning forward into the handlebars and huffing and puffing. And Richie, eleven or twelve or thirteen, barely knowing how to think of *anyone* in that way let alone knowing he thought of *boys* in that way, standing on the pegs and gripping Bill’s shirt at the waist and watching, fascinated, as Big Bill’s shoulders and back worked to help him wrestle Silver over a hill.

“What were we talking about?” Richie says. “Sorry, got lost in the thought of Bill’s gorgeous blue eyes again.”

“Sounds like you’re planning on making a move on him next, Richie. Is this something we should talk about?”

Richie scoffs. “*God*, no.”

Because of course he loves Bill, loves him in that same all-encompassing too-big-to-fit-inside-his-chest way that he loves all of them, the way he hadn’t thought was possible until coming back to Derry. But the thought of anything like *that* going on between him and Bill is...

Well, it’s actually kind of hilarious.

“More of a brown eyes kind of guy, huh?” Bev asks, and when Richie turns to look at her she’s leaning her head into one of the swing’s chains, looking back at him with a gentle smile on her face.

She hands him the cigarette, which is little more than a nub of filter

paper now, but Richie takes it anyway.

“Vastly underrated, if you ask me,” he says, avoiding her gaze and taking one final puff. He holds his breath while he drops the butt and grinds it under his heel, then lets the smoke curl out around his words as he sings a verse of Brown Eyed Girl under his breath.

Sha la la la la la la, la la lala dee-dah...

He’s not an idiot. He knows what Bev’s thinking.

Part of him wants to let it hang there and change the subject and move the hell on, because sure, Richie likes brown eyes, who gives a shit, not like they’re talking about anyone specific anyway.

Part of him wants to throw his hands up and roll his eyes and ask, *Christ, Bev, is it really that fuckin’ obvious?*

But the thing is, he knows she knows. Bev’s probably known since well before he dropped the Big Gay Bomb last week. Probably sitting there on that swing right now thinking about the moment she’d figured it out, thinking *yeah, Trashmouth, it’s pretty fuckin’ obvious*, thinking about Eddie lying back against the cave wall under Neibolt and Richie falling the fuck apart over it.

Eds, with those big brown eyes half-lidded and horribly horribly blank, and Richie, tugging at him and— and *clinging*, his hand cradling Eddie’s head and his nose in Eddie’s hair, hanging on tight and ignoring the fact that he’s already gone cold and thinking *he’s not dead he’s not dead he can’t be fucking dead we can still help him he can’t be—*

“Rich?”

Richie screws his eyes shut, shaking his head, like that’ll shake away the highlight reel rolling behind his fucking eyelids.

Bev’s hand is on his upper arm, running up and down, and when she runs her hand all the way down the length of his arm to take his hand, he lets her. Even squeezes back as he opens his eyes.

A twilit playground in peaceful, middle-of-nowhere Maine. No

sewers, no fucked up clown from hell, no dead best friend.

“You know, it’s okay, Richie.”

Richie huffs a laugh that definitely comes off sounding more bitter than he’d been shooting for. “Yeah? Is it?”

“Yeah, it is,” Bev answers without hesitation, and she laces their fingers together, swipes her thumb over the back of his hand. They idly swing back and forth with their hands still tightly linked, Richie heel-toeing the mulch under the swingset.

Eventually Bev asks, “Are you gonna tell him?”*

“No, I’m not gonna fucking tell him.” Richie shoots her a look with his eyebrows all the way up and his eyes wide. “Are you nuts?”

“You could tell him,” Bev insists. Gentle. Not you *should*, but you *could*. “You might feel better.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Richie scoffs. “Bet that’d make me feel *loads* better.”

It’s not like he hasn’t thought about it. Extensively. Not like he hasn’t wondered what would happen. Not like he’s not *tempted*.

But...

He’s thinking of Eddie at the Jade, decades older but somehow *exactly* as he’d been all those years ago. Eddie, the primary subject of Richie’s childhood fantasies for *some* fucking reason in spite of — because of? — the lame tube socks and the fanny packs and all that other dorky shit, the fantasies that teenage Richie had locked up tight somewhere even *he* thought he couldn’t reach them anymore. Eddie, still all soft with his hard edges, all spitfire anger and manic excitement and frayed nerves and fucking *unshakeable* concern for his friends.

Eddie, ringed in the white light still ebbing off the edges of Richie’s vision before that fucking spear ran him through. Eddie, using the last of his strength to squeeze Richie’s shoulder — like *Richie* was the one that needed comforting, *fuck* — while his other hand was busy, both his hand and Richie’s, clutching the blood-soaked jacket like it

was gonna make any difference at all. Eddie, too fucking still and too fucking cold, eyes blank and unseeing, all that manic energy sapped right out of him.

Richie gulps, squeezes Bev's hand again.

Refusing to believe Eddie was dead hadn't helped anything, it only made it hurt a thousand times worse when he was forced to face facts. *Belief* couldn't save Eds, but then, twenty four hours later, by some incredible miraculous twist of fate, something else could.

Something else *did*.

"I'm just— having him around's enough," Richie says, his voice quiet. "My best fucking friend's... out there, *alive*, not rotting at the bottom of some fucking sewer cave. I'm good with that. I'm really, really good with that. It's... enough, you know?"

Bev nods along. She takes in a breath, and Richie expects the next words that come out of her mouth to be something along the lines of, *Is it, Richie? Is it enough? Is it really?*

Instead, she lets the breath go, shoulders sagging with a sigh, and then she lifts their joined hands to press a kiss to Richie's knuckles.

"I love you, Richie. You know that?"

"Mm. Guess that means the offer to share Haystack is still on the table, huh?"

Bev lets out another snorting laugh, covering her mouth with her free hand and pitching her swing to the side so she can shove at Richie with her shoulder. She doesn't let go of his hand, though, nor does she unravel their fingers.

Richie squeezes her hand again.

"You, too, by the way," he tells her when her laughter dies down. "Obviously. Would've fucked off back to L.A. by now otherwise, but since the universe hates me, every single person I give a shit about is sticking around in fuckin' *Maine*, so." He shrugs. "Keep putting it off, I guess."

“Well,” Bev smiles, “we’re certainly not complaining about having you around.”

Richie smiles, too, then kicks his swing back as far as he can go and tugs Bev along with him, earning a startled yelp for his efforts. As their swings cut through the air he shouts in his best Foghorn Leghorn, “*Ah say, ah say, just give it time, dear girl! Gimme time!*” and her laughter echoing through the playground is enough, for the moment, to settle his nerves.

“Honestly,” Eddie says, lounging back against the deck chair on the balcony, looking up at the barely-there wisps of clouds drifting past in the breeze, the stars spilled out behind them, “dying is the *weirdest* thing to have ever happened to me.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. And you know that’s... well, that’s really fucking *saying* something, you know?”

Mrs. Patricia Blum Uris — the only other occupant of the balcony while the rest of the losers are all inside and well on their way to getting irresponsibly and *exquisitely* drunk — tilts her head in agreement. She seems just around the north end of pleasantly buzzed, right around where Eddie’s at, though he suspects that will change sooner rather than later, what with Bev continually roping everyone into taking shots as if they’re a bunch of college kids on their spring break and not in their fucking *forties*.

Patty says, “I do, yeah.”

And she does. She does know that if Eddie says *that’s the weirdest thing to have ever happened to me*, well, he’s not fucking around. He and Stan and the rest of the losers are something of an authority on the subject.

And Patty knows that.

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, hold the fuck up, Richie had yelled at her as if there was a fucking canyon between them rather than the length of a living room loveseat a few hours ago. *You’re telling me Stan told you everything. All of it. Every— I mean, fuckin’ everything? Like, everything everything?*

And Stanley had, in fact, told her everything everything. All of it. The clown included.

And you’re, like... Richie trailed off, pointed at her with the end of his beer bottle. *You’re cool? No hauling him off to a fuckin’ psych ward?*

Bill had smacked him in the back of the head for that, which was good, because Eddie had been worried that he might slack off on his duties as Person Physically Closest To Richie and let him say whatever stupid shit he wanted.

There was only so much a beep could accomplish from across the room, after all.

“But was the dying really that much weirder than the waking up?” Patty asks now. She’s got a plate on her lap, and she’s been systematically removing pieces from the sandwich on it and eating them one at a time. Tomato, turkey, lettuce, then bread. “I feel like that would have been weirder.”

Eddie hesitates, then tilts his head. “Yeah. Okay, you got me. Second weirdest, then.”

Patty laughs softly, dragging her last piece of bread through the dressing on her plate. From inside the townhouse, where Eddie knows the single most chaotic (and possibly *only*) game of truth or dare ever played between adults is taking place, Mike’s laugh can be

heard from the open living room window, followed by a string of profanities from Richie about... something to do with duct tape? Eddie has no idea.

He doesn't mind the noise, though. It's nice, and not just because he knows all that racket is definitely helping Georgie sleep two floors up.

"But like, that's my point," Eddie goes on, because she'd asked about it in the first place and it feels important that he gets this across. "You know? It wasn't the *worst* thing, it wasn't this crazy painful, terrible..." he trails off, poking around through the corners of his brain for the right word, failing, and then settling with, "... thing. It was just—"

"Weird?"

"Yeah!" Eddie agrees, toasting her with his own glass. "And... tingly?"

"Tingly."

"Tingly," Eddie repeats, nodding slowly. "All around—" he gestures vaguely at his own chest— "here. That was where I... yeah. You know. Where it got me."

When he turns to look at her again, he finds her sitting sideways in her chair with her plate on the floor beside her half-empty wine glass, regarding him with her head tipped sideways against the chair back. There's a look on her face that might be sympathy. Sympathy, or concern, or— there's something else there, too, Eddie thinks. In her eyes. Something he can't place.

She quietly clarifies, "Where *It* got you?"

Eddie nods again. "Yeah. It. I mean, Stanley told you the story. Or, y'know, the story that we told him. Richie got himself caught in those lights, and I was just— *there*, I mean, I was right there, watching him float *thirty fucking feet* above me," Eddie tells her, waving a hand at the open air in front of the balcony as if she'll be able to see it herself. "And I had this fence post, and at that point we were pretty

sure killing It had to do with belief, you know? ‘Cause that was Its whole schtick. It could hurt you and even kill you, but It relied on belief. Little kid rules, that’s— I mean, that’s probably why It went after kids the most, I think, but— *anyway*, yeah, so I had this fence post, and it was torn off the fence from this creepy ass house so it had one of those... spikes? At the top? And I figured, hey, Bev said it kills monsters, and all I had to do was really believe it kills monsters — which, yeah, again, little kid logic, but that had worked pretty well for us up until then — and so I... I threw it.”

He mimes the throw, lazily, but enough to get the point across. Then he lets his hand fall into his lap.

“And it worked, sort of. Got Richie out of the lights, anyway. Just... didn’t kill It.”

“Hurt It, though,” Patty reminds him, her voice soft, and Eddie turns to look at her again.

Ah, he thinks, finally able to place the note of righteous anger in her eyes. *So that’s what that is.*

Because Patty Uris — from what little Eddie has learned of her in the last twenty-four hours — is the sort of person who doesn’t get angry often, if ever. She’s blunt and to the point, but almost unfailingly kind. She laughs easily and smiles even more easily and seems just about impossible to ruffle, even in the presence of Richie, which is a feat for most people. For her an emotion like *hate* doesn’t quite seem to fit, doesn’t really click into place.

But of course she’d hate that clown anyway. Of course she would hate It every bit as much as the rest of them do. Of course she’d take some satisfaction from the fact that Eddie’s short-lived moment of (*insanity*) heroism managed to really hurt It.

“Yeah,” Eddie agrees, smiling for a second in spite of himself. “Yeah, I mean, I was so sure I’d killed It because...” he shakes his head, takes a breath and raspberries it out through his lips, eyes widening, “... well, ‘cause you should’ve heard it. Sure *sounded* like It was dying. Shrieking like you wouldn’t believe, flailing all over the place... It had to have been fucking fifty, sixty feet tall? And It was

spewing all this— all this *stuff*, everywhere, all over the cave, and I thought... I mean, I really thought it was finally fucking *over*, and..."

"Hey," Patty says, and it isn't until she speaks that Eddie realizes that his smile's fallen away, that he's been staring wide-eyed ahead at absolutely nothing. He shudders, shaking his head and lifting his drink for another sip, and Patty pokes at her own temple and says, "You were starting to get stuck up here. You still on Earth with us?"

"Yeah, it's, uh..." Eddie gulps. "I don't know. It's a lot, sometimes."

Patty nods. "Stanley does the same thing. Gets stuck in his head. He would, even before. That's one good thing, though, from all of... *this*, coming to light, you know? From remembering. At least now he's got some context."

"Yeah," Eddie says again. "Fucking clown."

They fall into silence for a second, Eddie peering down into his glass and swishing it around, watching the remainder of his ice clink and bob through the *way* too strong drink that Bill made him. It's good, except for the fact that it's made of about fifty percent whiskey. He takes another sip anyway.

"You *are* taking all this really well," Eddie tells her again. "I know we keep saying it, but it's true."

Patty looks down at the wine glass cradled in her lap.

"It all is... *incredibly* unbelievable," she admits, which is the fucking understatement of the century, "but so was Stanley coming back. So is *everyone*, you, Stanley, all those people coming back. I mean—" she opens her mouth, hesitates, then sighs— "I saw his *body*. I saw him, felt him. Buried him. And five days later he shows up on our doorstep, alive and well, talking about unexplained resurrections and horror movie monsters. It does wonders for a person's suspension of disbelief, I'll tell you."

She takes a sip of wine that turns into a nice, hefty gulp.

"That," she says, "and I'm trying not to look too deeply into it. I know that I got Stanley back. I know that the thing that took him

from me in the first place is gone. Seems a bit ungrateful to ask for all that *and* for everything else to make sense, too, doesn't it?"

Eddie blinks, then huffs a laugh. "That's... yeah, no, that's fair. Still not sure anyone else would take it so well, though."

Her own smile is wide, and she gives a coy shrug, lifting her drink with a flourish. "I guess I'm one in a million."

"Yeah, no kidding," Eddie laughs, and he means it. "Where the hell did Stanley even *find* you?"

"NYU sorority party, 1995," she answers without hesitation. She leans back in the deck chair, her eyes up toward the stars. "Fair warning, it's not exactly the stuff of romance novels. It's all very... mundane, *technically*, I suppose. We were introduced by a friend, no fanfare, no fireworks, but that one night was all it took."

"Yeah? That quick?"

Patty nods. "By the end of that party, I already had the suspicion. I thought, *okay, you know what, I think I might be in love with him*. But by the time the end of the semester rolled around, I was sure of it."

Eddie can't help smiling at that, and at the thought of a twenty-year-old Stanley, holding a red solo cup and probably wearing one of the same cardigans he wears now, looking every bit the forty-year-old accountant he's always *radiated* — even at twelve, thirteen, fourteen and surely at twenty — and yet somehow fitting right in. Laughing and having fun, playing drinking games, meeting the love of his life.

God, Eddie can't even *imagine* falling in love with someone that quickly, can't imagine being so *sure* of it. The only metric he has to compare is Myra. Well, Myra, and a twenty-four-year-old Eddie, who maybe knew he didn't quite *love* her the way a husband was supposed to love a wife, but who also knew (or thought, anyway) that she'd been the only real friend he'd ever had up until then.

Marrying her had been the obvious choice, if there ever was a choice at all, but it had never been born out of the kind of feeling Patty's describing. There was never a moment where he thought, crystal

clear in his head, *I'm in love with her.*

Would he even know a feeling like that, if he felt it now?

Is it too late at this point?

"That's..." Eddie eventually finds himself saying, desperate to stop circling around his thoughts, "... a really rare thing. I'm glad he found you. Glad you guys found each other."

"We are lucky," Patty agrees. "But you're one to talk, you know."

"I'm— *what?*"

Patty gestures at him with her glass. "You," she says, then corrects, "all of you. What Stanley and I have is rare, and I love every second of it, but the seven of you... I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. I *know* I haven't seen anything like it. None of you have seen Stanley since he was a teenager, and looking at the way you all act with each other, you'd think you've all been inseparable your whole lives. It's— I'm not sure how to describe it, but it's like there's something *physically* holding all of you together."

Eddie gulps. "I guess fighting off a Lovecraftian nightmare as kids together will do that."

She laughs softly, shaking her head. "It's not that. It's something else. I want to say it's love, but... somehow that feels like too simple of a word for it."

And *that*, well.

Eddie thinks he might know what she means by that.

Something about the panic that overtook him when Mike's phone call came through, not quite panic about the clown because he didn't *remember* the clown yet, but a visceral pull in his gut that said *something's not right, something hasn't been right for a really long fucking time, Jesus, how did I not know how wrong this was until now?* Something about stepping into the Jade and seeing Mike and Bill standing there and thinking, *oh, thank God, there you guys are, I've been looking for you.* Something about the way New York never felt

like home, his mother's house in Brooklyn had never felt like home, even crossing the town line into Derry didn't feel like home, not until he was sitting at that table surrounded by these people that he *loved* so much it felt impossible and there was this feeling of *yes, this is it, this is where I'm supposed to be.*

Like going to a college party and meeting a nice accounting major in a cardigan, and knowing, somehow, that this is the person you're going to spend the rest of your life with. Like spending one night with someone you've just met and thinking, *okay, you know what, I think I might be in love with him.*

Like love, but love bolstered by something else.

Eddie takes a breath, shrugs, and ventures, "Magic?"

"As good a guess as any," Patty agrees, raising her drink toward him. Eddie reaches across the space between their chairs and clinks his own glass against hers, and she repeats, "*Magic,*" in a hushed whisper that sounds like reverence.

The silence that follows is more companionable this time around.

Eddie stares down at his melting ice and diluted whiskey, and he finds himself wondering if he's ever been so *sure* about anything else, anything other than seeing his friends and knowing he belonged with them, knowing he never should have left in the first place.

He can probably count on one hand the number of times he's been so sure of himself, really. When he was fourteen and dumping a pile of bullshit pills out of his bag, storming out the front door to save his friends. When he was sixteen and moving out of Derry and he'd croaked into Richie's shoulder, *I'm gonna call every fucking night, asshole, I swear.* When he was thirty-three and bought the Escalade, for no other reason than because it felt right, even though he could no longer remember being a little kid who wanted to drive a Cadillac one day.

Then, at forty-one, when he saw the swirling lights and Richie hanging suspended in the air, the fence post warm in Eddie's hands from where he'd been holding it in a death grip for who knew how

long. The crystal clear thought of *he's going to die if I don't do something*, the understanding that if anyone was going to save Richie, it had to be him, and fuck the consequences.

And the thing is, Eddie might not have said what he says next, except he's just drunk enough to loosen his tongue, and his mind's already been on it nonstop for the last few days, and they've been talking about love anyway, and plus—

Plus, he *likes* Patty. He only met her yesterday and he already knows he likes her, in a way that he supposes might be the natural result of her being Stanley's wife, of her being the sort of person Stan would marry. An honorary Loser. He *trusts* her.

But it also might be the fact that he physically cannot hold the fucking thought in anymore.

Eddie downs the remainder of his drink, looks at anything other than Patty, and quietly admits, "I thought about kissing Richie the other day."

That's not exactly the whole truth. The whole truth would have been something closer to *I thought about kissing Richie's neck the other day*, which is slightly worse, or *I thought about kissing him once and now I can't fucking stop thinking about it and I'm pretty sure I thought about it a lot when we were teenagers, too*, which is much more than slightly worse.

It's not the whole truth, but it is a truth.

Patty asks, "Yeah?"

Every ounce of blood in his body has taken residence in his cheekbones. He nods.

"So why didn't you?"

"What—?" Eddie blinks, shoots a look at her. "What the hell do you *mean* why didn't I?"

"What, were you thinking about it when he wasn't there?"

"I didn't— I wasn't... No, he was right in front of me. In my bed— *not!* Not ... like that. We were just. Hanging out."

"And you thought about kissing him."

"Fucking announce it to the whole townhouse, why don't you?" Eddie whines, sinking as deep into the deck chair as it'll allow, and covering his burning face with one hand. "*Ugh*, I don't even know why I said it out loud. Fuck."

Patty laughs. "Hey, it's okay. Your secret's safe with me."

"*I know*, I don't think you'd— I just— I didn't— I don't know what the fuck I'm saying."

"Okay," Patty says, slowly, "but... I don't mean to sound dismissive, Eddie, but *I do* think you might be making a mountain of a molehill here."

Eddie lifts his head from his hand and sends her a humiliated look. "I thought about kissing my best friend, who also happens to be a guy, and he's— he's my fucking *best friend*, and you think that's making a mountain of a molehill?"

Patty squints at him, her tongue pinched between pursed lips. "So is it the fact that he's a guy that's bothering you? Or the fact that he's your friend and you're worried he wouldn't take it well?"

"Uh. Both? The— the second one, I guess, mostly, but I don't— I don't *know*."

"Well, what are you afraid of?"

"Everything," Eddie answers right away, throwing his hands up. "Fucking everything! I am literally always fucking terrified, and this is just one more thing to add on top of the pile of *things that make me fucking terrified*. And I'm not— I'm not *brave*, I can't just think—" and he remembers himself here, drops his voice to a whisper— "I can't think, 'oh, I want to kiss my best friend' and then fucking *do it*. I think if I even tried to do it I would just... freeze, I don't know. Like I always do when shit's terrifying, which is always, because shit is always terrifying, and it literally always has been for the entirety of

my fucking life.”

Patty doesn't say anything to that, not at first.

Eddie drops his head into his hand again, massaging his temple. Evidently he is *not* as drunk as he thought he was. Not enough to be having this conversation, anyway. Finally he drags his hand down his face and says, “Sorry.”

“No worries,” Patty tells him. “But I mean, you're saying you're not brave, which... personally, I think being brave is something you *do*, not something you *are*, but that's kind of beside the point. Did you not *just* get done telling me you threw a fence post at a fifty-foot-tall Lovecraftian nightmare last week? That doesn't sound like something someone who's ‘not brave’ would do.”

“That was different.”

Patty shrugs one shoulder. “Maybe.”

“Look, can we—? Can we forget I said anything? Please? Can we erase the last five minutes of this conversation?” Eddie asks, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Let's go back to talking about how I died, that was so much less agonizing.”

Patty raises her hands in surrender, though there's the faintest hint of a smile on her face. “Like I said, your secret's safe with me.”

“Even from Stan?”

“Even from Stan,” she agrees with a single nod, and Eddie believes her. “Can I say something, though? Before we return to the much lighter topic of your gruesome death by the fifty-foot Lovecraftian nightmare?”

Eddie waves a hand that says, *Fine, sure, why not?*

“I don't think you give yourself enough credit,” Patty says, her voice softer than before. “I think you can be a hell of a lot braver than *I've* ever been, you've certainly faced much more terrifying things than I ever have, and not for nothing, but *I* kissed Stanley within a few hours of meeting him, so.”

Eddie gives a silent laugh, looking away. “Yeah, yeah, I know, you’re both perfect for each other and perfectly in love. Go ahead, rub it in.”

“Oh, I fully intend to.”

Eddie nods at her. That’s only fair. After losing Stanley the way she did and then getting him back, she can parade how wonderfully, madly, perfectly in love with each other they are on national goddamn TV for all Eddie cares.

Patty slaps one knee with the hand not holding her empty wine glass, and she stands up. “Now, come on. I need more of those amazing little sandwiches Beverly made, and *you* need more whiskey. Let’s go. Up, up, up!”

When they come back inside, they find Mike, passed out on the couch with his head on his folded arms, and Stan, curled up with his back to everyone and his head on a pillow on Mike’s lap. Bev and Ben and Richie, on the other hand, are wide awake and giggling uncontrollably as they put the last finishing touches on their drunken group project.

Which, naturally, is duct taping Bill to the wall of the living room.

“Oh, my God,” Patty bends over with her hands on her knees, already nearly in tears from laughing.

Eddie throws his hands up. “What the hell did you guys *do?!?*”

“What’s it look like?” Bev asks, laying another piece of duct tape over Bill’s left leg with almost comical precision and then straightening up to ruffle his hair, to which he only responds with a dopey drunken smile. “This was Ben’s dare.”

Richie snaps a photo, and everyone’s phones all buzz at the exact same time when he sends it to the group chat as if they’re not literally all in the same room. He takes a few more pictures at different angles and says, in what is definitely a Kitty Forman impression, “*He likes to be tall!*”

Patty keeps laughing as she heads over to the couch, lifts Stan’s legs up for long enough to free up the seat, and then places them back down over her lap. Ben says nothing at all, just continues laying tape at very specific angles that only he seems privy to, totally engrossed in the project. Eddie drops his head into his hands, Bev throws an arm over his shoulders and kisses his hair, and Richie snaps a picture of that too and sends it off to the group chat.

It is, unfortunately, a true feat of engineering on Ben’s part. Bill does not fall or even come loose.

In fact, he doesn’t come down at *all* until twenty minutes later, when he sheepishly admits that he has to pee, prompting an eruption of groans from Richie and Bev and Ben and one *don’t look at me I didn’t tell you to tape him to the fucking wall* from Eddie before they all set about releasing him from his duct tape cocoon.

Later, after Patty wakes Stan up and guides him up to their guest bedroom, and after Bill prods Mike off the couch and walks with him up the stairs and doesn't come back down, the night comes to an end with only Bev and Ben and Richie and Eddie left in the living room. Ben's stretched out on the recliner with his ankles crossed and his head tipped back, fast asleep. Bev's curled up on his lap, blinking in that slow dazed way that means she'll likely be following him into sleep sooner rather than later.

And Richie and Eddie are on the couch, after a heated argument about which one of them had the right to claim every square inch of it and both of them losing — or both of them winning, depending on how you chose to look at it. Richie had played the tallest person in the room card, Eddie had played the *I fucking died you piece of shit* card, and they ended up shoving and kicking at each other until they were forced to share, their legs tangled together like they're fourteen fucking years old again and clambering into the old clubhouse hammock.

Richie looks on the brink of sleep himself. He's got one hand on Eddie's ankle, the other tapping out a rhythm on his own knee, a slow and lazy rhythm that is in *no* way in time with the music still playing lowly from the little stereo system by the TV.

His eyes drift shut, and Eddie stretches his leg out to swat Richie's face with his foot.

"Ow, c'mon, Eds," Richie mumbles. "That's not—" he pauses, jaw opening wide with a yawn— "not fair play."

"Don't fall asleep," Eddie says, even though he feels seconds away from it himself. "Then I'll be the last one up."

"Mm, can't have that, can we," Richie yawns again, which draws an echoing yawn from Eddie, and then he tips his head sideways to rest his cheek against Eddie's shin. His hand finds its way onto Eddie's knee. "Can't leave my Eds here all on his own."

Eddie feels a flush coming on, which he chooses to blame on the alcohol. He is well and truly drunk now, and—

This might be a good time to go ahead and *do* it. He's too drunk to worry about consequences, too tired to maintain his inhibitions, and precisely *because* he's so drunk and tired, he could always shrug it off later if he has to.

"Hey, Richie?"

Richie closes his eyes. "Mm?"

Eddie opens his mouth. He thinks of Patty saying *I don't think you give yourself enough credit*, and *being brave is something you do, not something you are*. He thinks of Richie in the sewers before everything went to shit, his hand on the side of Eddie's neck, warm and reassuring.

You're braver than you think.

"I'm gonna say something," Eddie says.

Already, he knows he is not going to say the words that are building up at the back of his throat. He can barely even fucking think them.

Okay, he thinks. Baby steps. Maybe not *the* truth, but *a* truth.

"I'm gonna say something, and it's something I'm literally never gonna repeat ever again, okay? And if you make fun of me I'm gonna raid your closet and burn every single ugly Hawaiian shirt you fucking own. Got it?"

"Ooh, okay," Richie murmurs, eyes still closed. "I'm all ears, Eds."

"I'm..." Eddie gulps, lowers his voice. "I'm really glad we found each other again, man." At that, Richie opens his eyes, looking at him through the slightly smudged lenses of his glasses with an expression Eddie can't quite pin down. "I just— I *missed* you, you know? Never knew I did, 'cause I didn't know who you fucking were, but..." He shrugs. "I dunno. Still missed you, I guess."

Richie stares at him for another few seconds before a grin slowly spreads over his face.

"Aww—"

“*Fuck* you,” Eddie rolls his eyes, because he can hear the mocking tone in Richie’s voice already. “*Fuck* all the way off, dickhead, I take it back.”

Richie’s laughing, and Eddie realizes a little too late that he is, too. Richie squeezes his knee and murmurs, “Accol... Aco... Drinking makes you *sappy*, Eddie baby.”

Eddie flips him off.

“Jus’ means *I love you* in sign language,” Richie mutters through another yawn. He closes his eyes again and, apparently, decides that Eddie’s shin is going to be his own personal pillow for the remainder of the night. His middle finger lifts away from Eddie’s knee, but the rest of his fingers stay right where they are. “Love you, Eds.”

It sends his cheeks burning again, but at least no one can see it this time. Eddie drops his head back onto the couch’s armrest — the room spins worryingly for about half a second, but it slows to a stop quickly enough — and he closes his eyes.

“Love you, too, Richie.”

That night, Eddie dreams a very different dream.

There are no strange ethereal sea turtles floating on the outskirts of his vision tonight. No sun-dappled ocean and none of that strange perfect impossible terrifying warmth.

It's not a *bad* dream, not really, though the sight that greets him when he first opens his eyes is... well, this *is* the setting that a whole lot of his nightmares have used over the last few decades, that's for fucking sure, even if he never knew at the time that it was a real place, even if he never *remembered* that it was. Not until he came back to Derry.

Eddie opens his eyes, and he's inside 29 Neibolt Street.

He's sitting in what might have once been a living room, the room that's to your left as soon as you walk in the front door. His knees dig into the disgusting floorboards that are half rotted through. He's wearing what wore when he died, the greywater-soaked jeans and the blood-soaked shirt and the grime-soaked jacket, all of which has been long since thrown out in the real world. Here, light filters its way in through the cracked window and the torn curtains and the cobwebs, a soft yellowish light illuminating beams of swirling dust motes and a million fucking allergens right in front of Eddie's face.

What the hell is he doing here, anyway?

The front door opens before he can figure it out, a slow lilting screech of old hinges and a widening cone of white sunlight, and three sets of footsteps wander in, stilted and hesitant.

"Can't believe I drew the short straw."

Three kids step into the foyer, three kids that Eddie recognizes instantly.

"You guys are lucky we're not measuring dicks," the little baby-faced version of Richie says, his eyes three times too big in those glasses.

"Shut up, Richie."

To Richie's right is— well, it's Eddie, as he was in 1989, but it's not *exactly* right. This little version of him already has a cast on his arm, for one thing, and Eddie can feel the phantom pain twitching up his own forearm at the sight of it, that familiar ache that crops up whenever it's about to rain.

But that can't be right, because this Eddie hasn't broken his arm yet.

Because he *remembers* this, it's the first time they ventured into this house, him and Bill and Richie, it's the first time they tried to come after It, and it'll be at least another half hour or so before this little version of him takes a tumble through the rotted floorboards upstairs and smashes through a kitchen table and snaps his arm in half.

Eddie watches, struck silent, as the three kids make their way further into the house—

And Eddie, little fourteen-year-old Eddie, stops. He's clearly about to follow after Bill and Richie, but then his eyes catch on the other Eddie, the actual Eddie, actual forty-one-year-old Eddie kneeling in the living room, and he stops.

At first he doesn't say anything, neither of them do, as Richie and Bill's footsteps fade deeper into the house, leaving only the pair of Eddies behind.

Little Eddie Kasprak frowns at him, a twinge of concern in his eyes, but something— *knowing* there, maybe. He crosses his skinny arms over his chest as best he can with the cast, protective, hunching in on himself. Eddie leaves his own hands where they are in his lap.

The kid gulps, visibly, then speaks to him in a voice that's *small small small*.

"You're— you're me, aren't you?"

Eddie nods. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"What...? How old—?"

"Forty-one. It's been... I mean, this is a twenty-seven year old memory for me."

"*Holy fuck,*" says his little doppelganger who definitely should not be saying shit like that, but it strikes Eddie suddenly that he remembers *being* this kid. He remembers dropping curse words every two seconds because he thought it made him sound cool. He remembers feeling small and anxious and terrified for himself, he remembers feeling small and anxious and terrified for his *friends*, but he also remembers, in fleeting moments, feeling far bigger than a kid that size ever

should have had any right to feel. Feeling unbreakable.

There's a sound from deeper in the house, the creaking of ancient hardwood, the distant sound of little fourteen-year-old Bill's voice.

Both of them, both Eddies, turn and look toward it.

"It all goes to shit, doesn't it?"

Eddie gulps, nods. "Yeah. It does, it all goes to shit."

"Fuck," the kid mutters under his breath, squeezing his eyes shut for a second and then, when he opens them, looking straight up at the ceiling. *"What happens? To them? Are they gonna—?"*

"They're gonna be alright. Richie, Bill, all of them," Eddie tells him, because it's true. Eventually. "A lot of it sucks, and it's really scary and it's disgusting and it's just... It's the *worst*, but they're all... okay, in the end. Relatively speaking."

The kid nods, his mouth a tight worried line— and that worry, *that* is what Eddie remembers the most about being this kid, this tiny fourteen-year-old who barely looks any bigger than nine-year-old Vicky or eight-year-old Dean, the kid who loved his friends so much he felt like he'd burst open from it, the kid who was willing to trek through hell and back and hunt down his literal worst nightmare where it lived just to save fucking *one* of them.

"But it ends."

"Yeah," Eddie says, grinning. "Yeah, it does."

"Thank God," the kid breathes, and he finally tears his eyes away from the ceiling and meets Eddie's gaze across the room. He glances at Eddie's cheek, and then of course his eyes trail down to the ugly evidence of something far worse than a stab wound, painted in deep red all across his torso. *"And— and you? Me?"*

"Oh, yeah, it's fine. This is..." He plucks at a relatively clean part of his shirt. "Nothing, just battle wounds," Eddie says, because this version of himself that he's talking to is so *small*, and he looks so fucking scared that Eddie can't help trying to make him feel better,

even a little bit, even if he's not real. "But you do okay, you know? You do alright for yourself."

The kid doesn't buy it, because of course he doesn't. *"Yeah, that sounds like bullshit."*

God, he was such an ornery little shit as a kid.

"It's... it's not, though," Eddie tells him, and he means it. "You do alright, eventually. I mean, there's a while there where you— you forget, but—"

"Forget? Forget what?"

Eddie bites his lip.

You forget all of it, he thinks. You forget the clown and the leper and this house and Bill's little brother and all the other missing kids. You forget your friends. You forget all about that white-hot anger and love and hope duking it out in your chest right now. You forget the placebos and the fact that you're not nearly as delicate as our mother always made you think you were. You forget all of it.

Eventually he settles on the most important one, though.

"You forget what it's like to be brave."

The kid scoffs, but there's something raw and hurt in the way he does it, shaking his head and looking off in the direction his friends have disappeared to. He croaks, *"Can't forget something you never knew in the first place."*

"Now that, no, that's bullshit. You and I both know that's a load of bullshit."

The kid looks at him again, frown unwavering, but he says nothing else.

And Eddie looks at him, at himself, and thinks of a scattered pile of pills and his mother's scandalized face. He thinks of waist-deep creek water and rocks heavy in his arms, ready to throw. He thinks of a scream tearing itself from his throat like a feral little fucking monster

and his foot cutting through air to connect with that clown's skull.

"You're a whole lot braver than you think," Eddie tells him. "And you forget that. For a long, long time, you forget how brave you are. But it's okay, 'cause you remember again, eventually. You remember, and you help them kill that clown for good, and then you work really hard and you undo all the dumb decisions you made while you were busy forgetting. It's— It's good. It sucks for a while, it really does, but it gets better. It gets a lot better."

The frown on the kid's face doesn't quite lift, but one eyebrow does.

"Seriously? It really gets better?"

Eddie smiles, feels it pull on the still healing hole in his cheek, and he doesn't care.

He thinks of saying, Oh, and also, by the way, you die a horrible painful death, but that part's only temporary. Maybe. You're not sure, and you're still kind of freaking out over it, because of course you are. You freak out over everything.

He thinks of saying, You launch a fence post at that clown like you're some kind of Olympic goddamn javelin thrower, you absolute fucking moron, and then you take a spike through the chest for it and bleed out in a disgusting cave and it's dark and it's cold and it's empty and it totally fucking sucks.

He thinks of saying, But it's worth it, buddy, trust me, it is so worth every second whether you end up dead for good or not, because your friends are all okay in the end, and you were so, so brave.

"Yeah," Eddie says instead, nodding, and it kind of feels like a benediction. "Yeah, it really does."

On Monday, while all the losers eagerly await news from Patty and Stan about their interview with the State of Maine's Health and Human Services Department, Eddie sits in his bedroom with the veritable *mountain* of paperwork required for the divorce settlement, and he is strongly considering the merits of tossing his entire fucking laptop out the second floor window when his phone lights up with an incoming call.

Not a New York area code, so probably not a lawyer. Not Myra, either. Not one of the losers' numbers.

Eddie frowns, glances up at the laptop screen again, and decides literally nothing — up to and including telemarketers — could be more annoying than what he's already doing. He picks up the phone.

"Edward Kaspbrak speaking."

"Oh, hey! Cool," a familiar voice instantly comes through the receiver. "Thought for sure I'd get a digit wrong."

Eddie blinks, pulls the phone away to look at the number again, and puts it back to his ear. "Adrian?"

"Yeah! Yeah, it's, um— it's me," Adrian answers. "You gave me your number? At the... at Derry Home? Remember?"

"Right," Eddie says, shaking his head. "Yeah. Of course. Obviously."

That whole day is such a fucking blur, but no, yeah, he definitely remembers his phone dying within minutes of his phone call to Mike, he remembers how young and terrified and fucking *lost* Adrian had seemed once they got to the hospital and the adrenaline wore off, and he remembers scribbling his number on a scrap of paper from the front desk and handing it to Adrian before the doctors wisked him away.

In case you need anything, Eddie told him. Someone to talk to about... all this, you know. Whatever.

Because of all the people who had been brought back, nearly all of them were little kids. Eddie had Stan to commiserate with, and, importantly, both Eddie and Stan had an in-depth knowledge (or as in-depth as it could get) of exactly what the fuck had killed them.

Adrian had neither of those things.

“Yeah,” Adrian says now, and he sounds different than Eddie remembers, but of course he does, since the only time Eddie’s ever spoken to him he was coming off the tail end of a *literal* resurrection from the dead and had been nursing a half-crushed windpipe amongst a laundry list of other injuries. “I was... Yeah. Okay, so, um, this is gonna sound totally crazy, right? And you totally don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but I was talking to Don about what happened, you know, to, um, to all of us, and again, like, it is *totally* cool if you don’t want to go into it or you just think I’m out of my mind or—”

“Adrian. It’s okay. What’s going on?”

A few seconds of hushed static. Then Adrian takes a breath and asks, “Do you remember a clown? Like, an *actual* clown? When you died? I thought— I thought it was just Vicky calling it that, but...”

Eddie sighs. Alright. So they’re gonna have *that* conversation. Fucking wonderful.

He checks his watch.

“Adrian, are you still in Derry?”

Adrian is not still in Derry. He's in Bangor.

They meet at a coffee shop that Adrian apparently frequents now that he lives here, a low-key place squashed between a law office and an empty glass-fronted shop with a sign that reads INDUSTRIAL SPACE FOR RENT in its window. The window of the coffee shop, on the other hand, is decorated with a hand-painted list of all their drink specials in swirling cursive letters and — Eddie can't help but notice — with a single rainbow flag sticker in the bottom corner. Inside the place is filled to bursting with leafy green plants and cacti in terra cotta pots, a bookshelf spanning the entire left wall from floor to ceiling, and a clientele that is, without fail, at least fifteen years younger than Eddie is.

To say he felt a little out of place walking in here would have been an understatement.

“So, it... it really was a clown, then,” Adrian says now, staring wide-eyed across their little table in the back corner. He's fiddling with a ring on his finger, absently spinning it around and around and around, pulling it off, putting it back on. His caramel frappe is forgotten, half empty and gathering condensation on the dark wood table. “I thought... Shit, I thought I was *hallucinating*.”

Eddie shakes his head. There'd been no point, he figured, in skirting around the truth here. He'd thought of Patty, of her talking about Stan's return from the dead, saying *it does wonders for a person's suspension of disbelief, I'll tell you*, and decided Adrian deserved to know.

And that was before Adrian told him he *saw* the damn thing before he died.

“Technically I think the clown was just... I don't know, Its favorite thing to look like?” Eddie guesses. “It could take whatever form It

wanted to, whatever scared people the most.”

“That’s some horror movie bullshit, man.”

Eddie opens up his hands and shrugs.

“No, no, I mean, I believe you,” Adrian’s quick to correct. “I’m just saying it’s totally *wild*, right? It’s so crazy, but I believe you. Of course I believe you, I don’t think you could make any of that up if you tried. Not unless you were on, like, a *startling* amount of drugs, and you’re totally the most straight-edge looking guy I’ve ever met.”

“Thank... you?” Eddie says, squinting, and Adrian only shrugs. “But yeah. You weren’t hallucinating.”

“And that means... shit, that means Donnie wasn’t hallucinating either,” Adrian says, though it sounds like he’s saying it more to himself than to Eddie. He sighs through his nose, closing his eyes. “Shit. He actually saw... you know, what he said he saw. Me. The clown.”

The clown killing me, he doesn’t say, but he’s absently rubbing at the spot where his arm meets his chest, just beside his left armpit, where according to the files in Mike’s notes is exactly the place his boyfriend told police the clown had sunk its teeth in.

Eddie sets his jaw and nods.

“*Shit*,” Adrian mutters again. “No wonder he was so wrecked over it, oh, my *God*. I mean, I knew it was bad, but I thought it was just those assholes, you know, Derry and all its homophobic bullshit. ‘Cause I knew Derry was an intolerant right-wing shithole but I didn’t know it was, like, an intolerant right-wing shithole that had a fucking *horror movie monster* in it. God. Donnie must’ve thought he was going crazy.”

Eddie frowns, turning his own cup around on the table. He wishes he could offer something better or more reassuring than, *well, no, he’s not crazy and neither are you, but you did get eaten by a horrifying nightmare monster from outer space right in front of someone who loves you, so win-some lose-some I guess.*

“But you said you killed the thing?” Adrian asks.

“I helped,” Eddie amends. “My friends did the actual killing. I was a little busy... Uh. Dying.”

“Right.” Adrian winces, shakes his head. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Eddie shrugs. It’s not as if he’s the only one who died because of that clown. He’s not even the only one sitting at this fucking *table* who died because of that clown.

“Thanks,” Adrian says. “For killing the thing, or... you know, helping kill It. I don’t think I’d be alive if you didn’t.”

“Well. I wouldn’t be alive either.”

“Still,” Adrian says, smiling and showing off a chipped front tooth. It’s one of the only remnants of the beating he took, that chipped tooth. That and a fading yellow-green bruise over his cheekbone, a reddish line at his temple. He looks *good*. Healthy. Healing. “Seriously, man. Thank you. I’m— I *really* like not being dead, having a whole life ahead of me, all that, you know.”

Eddie smiles back at him, and for maybe the millionth time Adrian twists his ring off, turns it around in his hands, and then slides it back on.

He can’t help asking. Plus, they fucking desperately need the change in subject to something nicer, something *happier*, so he looks pointedly down at Adrian’s hand and says, “You weren’t wearing that the last time I saw you.”

Adrian blushes, and he lifts his hand so that the ring’s facing Eddie. He gives his fingers a little flourish.

“He bought it four months ago, can you believe it? Kept blanking on how to ask me, said he wanted to do it with some, like, grand romantic gesture or something. But then— well, you know,” Adrian shrugs. “And then I came back, and he lasted about... three days? Before telling me? He literally blurted out ‘marry me’ while we were eating breakfast and then he, like, went *bright* red—” he waves at his own face, from his neck all the way up to the top of his head— “and

he ran into our room and came back with a ring box and he was like, 'No, really, I mean it, please marry me,' like he actually said please, and I cried like a baby for like, twenty whole minutes, I swear to God. I might start crying now just talking about it."

His eyes *are* shining, but he's grinning ear to ear, and he wipes the corner of one eye before taking a long deep breath and shaking out his shoulders.

"*Woo!* Okay, not crying, I'm good, I'm fine," he insists, fanning his face. "Totally fine. Anyway, yeah, I told him I was not fucking marrying him in *Derry*, I don't give a shit that it's his hometown, and he really did *not* take any convincing after what happened at the carnival, but... I mean, that's what I'm saying, you know? I got my whole life ahead of me, and I'm... I'm *really* happy to be alive. For a lot of reasons, not just the obvious one. So I *mean* it, man. Thank you."

And Eddie has no fucking clue what his own face looks like right now. He only hopes he doesn't look like he's about to start crying, too, since it's feeling like a near thing.

Because he's *really* happy for this kid.

He's also maybe the slightest bit jealous — which is ridiculous, feeling anything close to jealousy when this poor kid was beaten half to hell before Pennywise took a chunk out of his fucking armpit. But the jealousy's definitely there, for the fact that Adrian got to grow up in... well, pretty much anything that *wasn't* Derry in the fucking eighties.

Somewhere, Eddie thinks, maybe in another world that's a little bit kinder, Adrian didn't ask Eddie here because Adrian's the confused kid who was killed by a monster and Eddie's the guy who knows all about the monster that killed him. In that other world it's probably Eddie who asked Adrian here, because Adrian is the confident brash kid who's always known exactly who he was, and Eddie's the confused forty-one-year-old without a fucking clue how to how to be himself, without a clue where to even start *trying*.

But that's not the world they live in. And honestly, it's not Eddie's

concern right now anyway.

Right now Eddie's just very, very happy. Happy that this stupid brave kid who mouthed off to a bunch of assholes hellbent on killing him is alive. Happy that Don Hagerty got the love of his life back. Happy that something like this, something like Adrian being near tears and babbling about his *engagement*, can even exist after Pennywise, and that Eddie's even remotely *marginally* responsible for it existing.

"Well," Eddie says, clearing his throat. "You have my number now, so I expect a lot of disgustingly sappy wedding pictures when the date comes around."

"Uh. Honey," Adrian scoffs. "We're resurrection buddies—"

"Oh, God, do *not* call it that—"

"I am totally calling it that, I'm patenting it, we're resurrection buddies, no takesy-backsies, we are bonded for life, Mr. Eddie Kaspbrak. Or y'know, afterlife, whatever you wanna call it," Adrian says, winking as he leans forward and slurps at his frappe. "So you can expect an invite in the mail in a few months, and then you and a plus one can take all those disgustingly sappy wedding pictures yourself. How's that sound?"

Eddie smiles. "Sounds like I don't have a choice."

"You are absolutely goddamn right, you don't. 'Cause we're resurrection buddies. Go ahead, say it."

"I fucking won't," Eddie laughs.

"Come on, say it. *Say iiiiiiit*—"

Eddie sighs, all drawn out and melodramatic, and he tips his head back to stare at the ceiling and mutters, "We're resurrection buddies."

"Woo! Resurrection buddy fistbump."

Eddie levels a withering look at him, and then he smirks and raises his fist and lets Adrian bump it with his own. He even indulgently mirrors it as Adrian mimes an explosion.

Yeah.

He's really glad this kid's still around.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"What do you mean, am I out of my fucking mind? *You're* out of your fucking mind, *I'm* not out of my fucking mind."

"No, you! Are out! Of your fucking mind!" Eddie shouts, punctuating each word with a swipe of his hand in front of his face. "Richie, you *cannot* be serious. Camping? Fucking *camping*?"

"It wasn't even my—!"

"Do you have any idea how disgusting campground bathrooms are, Richie? Do you? Hundreds of people use those bathrooms every goddamn day, and the water is sourced from *groundwater*, and the mildew and soap scum build-up is a breeding ground for bacteria to the point that they're able to form full fucking *biofilms*, and do you even know what a fucking biofilm is, dude? It's when there's *so much* bacteria that they start layering on top of each other," Eddie goes on, gesturing with both hands, "so that antibiotics can only kill the top fucking layer and all that disease-carrying bullshit underneath survives like a fucking cockroach in a nuclear winter, and then it's free to worm its way into your system and send you straight to the hospital, and *why* are you looking at me like that? What the fuck is with your face?"

Richie, slouching against the door frame with his arms crossed and a grin tugging at one corner of his mouth, does a piss poor job of dropping the smile and says, “This is just my face, man.”

“Well, fucking fix it. And we are not going *camping*.”

“Okay, one more time, it wasn’t even my idea,” Richie reminds him. “It was Ben’s. And I think it’s a cool idea.”

“A *cool*—?”

“Yeah, dude,” Richie shrugs. “What the hell else are we gonna do? We need to get out, get the kid out, have some fun. Not like we’ve got thriving social lives outside of each other, and you’re off work, and all my tour dates are cancelled up til like, fuckin’ January, and —”

“What? Why?”

Richie freezes, mouth open. “Huh?”

“Why’d you cancel your tour dates?”

“Uh... *Oh*, uh, right, ‘cause... at the time I thought I was gonna be busy, y’know,” he shrugs again. “Recovering? From all the clown shit?”

“What do you mean, at the time?”

Richie looks at him like he’s got a screw loose. “I mean at the time, dude. As in, at the time when you and Stan the Man were, uh,” and here he adopts some weird accent that Eddie thinks maybe is supposed to be an undertaker, “*no longer with us*. Ring any bells? Or did you forget your fuckin’ sabbatical from the land of the living?”

Eddie’s mind has snagged on this, though. “You cancelled four months worth of tour dates to mourn me?”

Richie gulps. Eddie sees it. “And Stan.”

“And Stan,” Eddie agrees, because that’s what he’d meant to say. “But... dude, what were you gonna do? Just sit around and fucking

wallow?”

It is a *supremely* depressing thought, made all the more depressing by how easy it is to imagine, how realistic it is. Richie always dealt with the bad stuff, the really bad stuff, with self-imposed isolation even though loneliness was *torture* for him.

Makes sense he'd have handled all of... this, the same way.

Richie opens his mouth, fucking *visibly* formulates a sincere response in his head and promptly detours around it. “Wow, have *some* faith in me, Eduardo. Obviously I would have gone back to L.A. and drowned my sorrows in copious amounts of cocaine and a harem of gorgeous women— sorry,” Richie scrunches up his nose, blushes. “Old habits. A harem of gorgeous men? Is it still a harem if it's made of dudes? A harem of dick?”

Eddie rolls his eyes and turns away, returning to the task of folding his laundry.

“Anyway, kind of a moot fuckin' point, isn't it? You're alive and kicking, Staniel's alive and kicking, in a stunning turn of events *Georgie's* alive and kicking, along with about a thousand sad saps from the eighteen hundreds, and we're celebrating by—”

“Don't say it—”

“— going camping.”

“We. Are not. Going. Camping.”

They go camping.

Contrary to what he told Richie, Eddie's biggest concern hadn't, in fact, been the cleanliness of the campground but the *secludedness* of the campground, the potential *scariness* of it. They've got a traumatized six-year-old who's afraid of the dark and the quiet, for God's sake! Camping is automatically a terrible fucking idea!

But of course Ben accounted for that. Because he's Ben. He finds a popular, well traversed campground in Acadia, not too far, just secluded enough to be peaceful, but so packed full of tourists this time of year that it's nearly impossible they'll ever find themselves truly alone in the middle of the night without a dog barking or a little kid shrieking in the distance. It's smart, because again, it's *Ben*.

Eddie's next biggest concern is... well.

Ben rents them four little camping cabins, each with their own bathroom and a stand up shower that Eddie will waste no time in disinfecting, each with a *bring your own linens* policy as if Eddie wasn't going to bring his own freshly washed sheets anyway.

But— four cabins.

Ben and Bev. Stan and Patty. Mike, Bill, and Georgie. Richie and Eddie.

God *damn* it.

“So I’m fuckin’ booking it, right? Peeling that little shitty Toyota as fast as I can through the empty parking lot, tires squealing, and this guy’s sprinting after the car with cake icing all over him, and my friend’s in the passenger seat wearing the Batman mask just fuckin’ screaming his head off...”

Richie keeps telling his story as they make their way up the steps to the cabin, mostly for Ben and Bev, since Eddie’s pretty sure he’s heard this one before.

He’s having trouble paying attention, anyway.

It’s one of his Bad Days today, and even if it wasn’t, he’s got more pressing concerns.

“And I pull up to a stoplight and my friend’s freaking out going, *Go right on red! Go right on red!* And Usain fuckin’ Bolt is gaining on my bumper, and I’m panicking, so naturally I gun it and go left,” Richie says, and Bev laughs, and Ben’s shaking his head with a smile as he unlocks the door to the cabin that will, for the next three nights, belong to Richie and Eddie.

There are two beds inside.

Eddie releases a breath.

“And he was so ungrateful, kept talking about how I don’t know how to drive—”

“You *don’t* know how to drive,” Eddie insists, almost on instinct as he drops his two suitcases on the right side bed.

“I saved our lives! Did you not hear the story? Thing One, Thing Two, back me up here,” Richie says to Ben and Bev. Ben holds his hands up as if to say, *Don’t look at me*, and Bev only laughs. Richie continues, “So I went left instead of right, whatever, man, sure it’s not technically *legal* but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t the right call to make—”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t you have just gone right—”

“It’s always different in the heat of the moment, Eds, go ahead and ask your—”

“Do! Not!” Eddie shouts, prompting a full cackling laugh from Bev. “Oh, my God! Where is your fucking off switch?”

“Ooh, I’m glad you asked, you know that three inches of space between my—?”

Eddie grabs his toiletry bag and beans Richie right in the back of the head with it.

Camping isn’t so bad, Eddie thinks.

It might be because they’re staying in cabins rather than tents (despite the fact that said cabins are equipped with quite possibly the stiffest camping mattresses on the face of the Earth), or because those cabins have their own bathrooms which Eddie can scrub and sterilize to his heart’s content (which he does, borderline obsessively while Richie heckles him from the cabin’s main room), or because he’s going to be sleeping on brand new bedsheets and new pillowcases and new pillows and a new comforter that he bought, specifically, because of this trip (*yeah go ahead laugh all you want asshole!*) but—

Well.

It’s probably none of that, really.

Probably has more to do with the losers, all of them together, all of them alive to annoy the absolute *shit* out of Eddie and to drag him into some of the longest most tedious hikes on Earth (thank you, Ben and Mike), all of them alive and out and about, goofing off in the woods just *because* for the first time since Eddie was a kid.

It's close to the feeling he'd gotten in the townhouse, with Mike returning from his trip, with Stanley and Patty arriving in his dented Escalade, with all of them under the same roof and this feeling of *completeness* taking him over.

But it's more than that, too. Somehow.

They spend that entire first day driving around Acadia and hiking, mostly following Mike wherever he suggests they go. Eddie's pleased to find that, next to Ben and Mike, he is actually in the best shape out of the rest of them and can *actually* keep up, unlike Bill and Stan and Patty, who ditch the last two hikes in favor of taking Georgie up to Bar Harbor proper and getting him some ice cream, and unlike Richie and Bev, who ditch the second-to-last hike and return for the last one with reddened eyes and dopey pleased grins on their faces.

Eventually, when the sun's dipping down, they all return to the campground, and Richie and Bev pull a veritable *treasure trove* of campfire food — hot dogs and buns, graham crackers and chocolate and enough marshmallows to feed an army — out of the back of Mike's old pickup. Ben builds a campfire, and they pass through the night in a haze of smoke and crackling logs and the distant sounds of the campground. Crickets and cicadas, other patrons' kids playing and shouting, a group of college kids laughing and playing bass-thumping music some fifty yards through the woods.

Eddie and Bill work together trying to teach Georgie how to roast a perfect marshmallow, and Georgie is an excellent student, rotating each marshmallow with careful wide-eyed precision, holding his breath the way kids do when they're hyper-focused on a task.

Richie, on the other hand, insists marshmallows are best when they're burnt, and he makes Georgie watch with an enraptured look on his round little kid face as Richie eats a marshmallow that's *still on fucking fire*.

Eddie shouts at him, Richie grins through a mouthful of molten lava sugar and attempts a Foghorn Leghorn impression — a favorite from when they were kids — despite lacking the ability to ununciate fucking *anything*, and Bev and Mike and Patty and even Stan dissolve into fits of breathless laughter, and Eddie reluctantly follows soon after them, at least until Georgie purposely catches his own marshmallow on fire and tries to follow in Richie's footsteps.

Just as everything with the losers tends to be, it is horrendously chaotic, and loud, and an absolute mess, and very much perfect.

But, naturally, on this day when all the losers are together and carefree and everyone's all smiles and laughter and everyone — including himself, for the most part — is having *fun*, of course that's when his anxiety decides to act up for No Fucking Reason Whatsoever. Of course it would flare up when for all intents and purposes it should be the farthest thing from his mind. Of course it would clench at his heart at the most random of moments when he's not even fucking *thinking* about it.

Of course it would.

And it's not even Richie that's got him freaking out, even now, when they're sitting here just the two of them after everyone else has gone to bed, sitting side-by-side in front of the smoldering remains of the campfire while Richie makes a showy attempt at roasting a marshmallow the *right* way. It's not Richie that's got Eddie's anxiety flaring, it's not Richie that's *been* getting his anxiety flaring, not

today, because his anxiety over Richie is easy to forget when they're falling into step together, when they're laughing and shoving at each other and arguing about anything under the sun.

So, no. It's not that.

"Eds? *Yoo-hoo*, Earth to Spaghetti-Man!"

"Don't call me that," Eddie automatically responds, coming back to himself and shooting a glare at Richie, who's holding a shockingly well roasted marshmallow in his hand and looking at Eddie with poorly masked concern on his face.

Richie pops the marshmallow into his mouth and says through the glob of hot sugar, "Ah-ha! There he is."

"There I am?"

"You went away for a bit," Richie says when he's finished swallowing. "Looked like you were gonna find the secrets of the universe in Haystack's expertly crafted campfire or something. Care to share with the class?"

Eddie frowns up at him and tugs the blanket he's holding a little tighter around his shoulders. He's still too cold, and he resists the urge to ask Richie to throw another log in the fire.

It's not that kind of cold and he knows it.

Quietly, quiet enough that he almost hopes Richie won't even acknowledge it, Eddie asks, "You remember Pet Sematary, Rich?"

Richie blinks, eyebrows lifting, and then he says, "Pet Sematary, yeah, course I do, yeah." He twists another marshmallow onto his goop-covered stick and, dropping his voice several octaves and adopting an Alabama twang, says, "*Ayuh, Mistuh Gambini—*"

"That's My Cousin Vinny, shithead."

"Is it?" Richie asks, wrinkling his nose and squinting through the embers until it seems to dawn on him. "Oh, right, right, right. Duh. Same guy, though, wasn't it? Fuckin', uh... Herman Munster, that

guy, right?”

“Yeah, it was the same guy.”

Something in his tone must worry Richie, because he falls silent for a moment and then, after what seems like an eternity of careful deliberation, he scoots an inch or so along their makeshift log bench until he's close enough to nudge Eddie with his elbow.

“Didn't we sneak in to that one?”

Eddie blinks. A new memory comes back, lifting out of a twenty-seven year fog and settling comfortably in his frontal lobe, or whatever the fuck part of a brain usually holds childhood memories and got scooped out of them the second they all left Derry as kids.

“Shit, yeah,” Eddie murmurs, eyes still on the fire. “I forgot about that.”

“Yep.” Richie turns over his marshmallow. He's getting better at not lighting them on fire, but then again, that's probably because the fire's so much lower now than it was. “I talked the concession lady's ear off while you guys ran in like a pack of fuckin' gazelles. Bumping into shit, whispering to each other, almost ruined the whole thing.”

The corner of Eddie's lip turns up, only for a second. “How the hell did we even get away with that?”

Richie shrugs. “I think they just didn't give a shit. I remember that concession lady being crazy old, but she was probably barely older than we were, you know? Probably like eighteen or nineteen or something. What's she care if a bunch of kids get the piss scared out of 'em by a movie, huh?”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, nodding. “Yeah, I guess.”

Eddie tugs his blanket tighter, wraps his arms around himself and shoves his hands and the corners of the blanket up under his armpits. It doesn't do much. A shiver runs through him, even though he's wearing a hat and a scarf and sitting two feet away from a fucking campfire.

Richie's voice is soft when he asks, "Why you bringing it up, Eds?"

It takes a second for Eddie to answer. It takes a second for him to figure out whether he *wants* to answer. His next inhale trembles at the end as another shiver wracks through him, but he lets the breath fill up his lungs and then blows it out nice and slow.

Then he asks, "What if it's like that?"

"Huh? Like what?"

"What if I'm— what if we're, all of us..." Eddie peels an arm from around himself and waves at the cabin behind them, then shoves his hand back under his armpit again. "What if we're like that? Like— like Pet Sematary. Or not exactly like that, but the *concept*, you know? What if we were brought back, but it's all wrong somehow? I mean, I— I fucking died, Rich—"

"Uh, yeah," Richie says, his voice no longer soft. "I fucking know."

Eddie's mouth is a thin line as he shakes his head. Yeah, Richie knows, and yeah, Eddie's death is probably a sore spot for him, but if he doesn't get this out he's never going to and—

"I died, dude. I *died*. I fucking felt it, I knew I was dying and I was okay with dying as long as it meant we were taking down that fucking— that fucking clown and— and— and Georgie died, and Stan died, and then we're just... brought back? There's no... No catch? No consequences? No nothing?"

"Uh, try piles of trauma and a lifetime of paying out the ass for decent therapy, but—"

"I'm serious, Richie—"

"So am I," Richie cuts him off. "Hey."

His hand clamps down on Eddie's shoulder, which is a little awkward given how close they're sitting, with his arm twisted up in the scant space between them, but apparently he doesn't give a shit.

"Look," Richie says. "Look at me, Eds."

Eddie pulls his gaze away from the fire and looks at Richie. It's the kind of look that probably says, *What, Trashmouth? What do you have to say? What could you possibly say that could make any of this any less terrifying?*

"I know you died," is what Richie says instead. "I fucking know, alright? I was right goddamn there." He drops his hand and drops his marshmallow stick and gestures with both hands in front of him. "I was sitting there trying to keep all your fucking insides in with my jacket, and yeah, I still gave a shit about killing the clown, obviously I gave a shit, but I was..."

Eddie gulps. "Rich, you don't have to—"

Richie raises a hand. "No, I'm not done, man. They— they had to drag me out, you know that?"

Eddie's mouth snaps shut. He hadn't known that.

"Mike and, uh, and Ben, they... They had to drag me out of that—that fucking cave, because it was collapsing, and I— I couldn't..." Richie says, his voice lowered as he talks to his own hands. "I just got you— you *all* back, after twenty-seven years of fucking stolen memories, only to... what? Lose Stan before I got to see him again and then watch you fucking bleed out in some gross ass cave? *Hey, Trashmouth, here's your best friend back, sorry you forgot him for three decades, but at least you can get drunk and eat some Chinese food with him before he gets fucking kabobed!*"

That last word almost cracks at the end. Almost. Richie clears his throat, then ducks his head down and tugs his hands through his hair.

Eddie tightens his grip on the edges of the blanket, watching him, wanting very badly to bridge the gap between them but finding himself unable to move. Instead he murmurs, "I didn't know that."

A laugh seems to rip itself out of Richie's throat, dry and grating. "Yeah, you wouldn't have. You weren't exactly *around* for it. You weren't there anymore, and they had to drag me out, kicking and screaming, the whole way out of that house. Like, actually kicking

and screaming, if Ben and Mike weren't a couple of brick fucking shithouses—"

"Shit, Richie, I didn't—"

"No, no, no, no, no," Richie cuts him off, lifting his head from his hands. "Do not apologize, do not say you're sorry. You literally saved my life, Eds, there's no— and anyway that's not my *point*."

"Then what is, man?"

"My point is, *that's* the price," Richie tells him. "If you think there's gotta be some kind of catch to you all getting to come back, that's it, man. I— we all had to go through you dying in the first place, *you* had to go through dying in the first place, fucking— Georgie got his arm ripped off! That little kid, the one that fuckin' shrieks every time Mike lobs him into the couch cushions like it's the funniest thing he's ever seen, that kid got his arm ripped off and *died*, and you're telling me you think there's no *catch*? That's it, man, that's the catch. Georgie waking up every other night because the shadows in his room are too dark, that's the catch. All those poor fuckin' saps ending up in the wrong century because this whole magic resurrection bullshit didn't have some fuckin' discretion, that's the catch. You sitting here agonizing over whether you're about to go all Pet Sematary on us, m— Bev having nightmares about all that shit she saw in the deadlights, Bill going twenty-seven years without his little brother, all of us going twenty-seven years without remembering each other, *that's the fucking catch*, Eds. That's it. We lived through it. It's done."

Richie lets out a breath and drops his head back into his hands. Eddie opens his mouth to say something and then realizes he doesn't know what to say at all.

"Fuck, man," Richie says before Eddie can knock any sense into his head, his voice is halfway muffled by his palms. He drags his hands down his face and looks at the fire. "I know you're kind of, like, *always* gonna worry about shit like this. And that's fine, man, that's *you*, I know you can't help it. And I know there's a whole lot of this bullshit we don't understand, and the magic back-from-the-dead cold can't exactly be fuckin' *reassuring*, and you think that those

weird turtle dreams you're having are some kind of bizarre fucking premonition or—"

"You *know about that?*"

"What? The turtle dreams? Yeah, of course I know about that. Stan was worried about you, man," Richie says, "and that's not the point, either. Just— I'm saying, like, worry about what you gotta worry about, 'cause I know you can't help it, but don't let it fucking *eat you alive*, you know?" He holds his hands up, shaking them on either side of his head, then drops them. "You seem pretty fuckin' alive to me, man. You got your life back. Stop agonizing over it and like, I dunno, *live*. Do whatever the fuck you want. Shit, I know that's what *I'd* be doing, and if anybody deserves to just fucking live and not worry about it, it's you, Eds. It's you."

Again, Eddie opens his mouth and finds the words won't come.

For a moment he wanted to say, *yeah, I know that's what you'd be doing, asshole, you always do whatever the fuck you want*, but the retort withers and dies somewhere above his diaphragm.

Instead he says, "I'm gonna take a shower," and abruptly stands, dragging the blanket with him and hurrying into the cabin before Richie can get another word in.

Eds is taking, quite possibly, the longest shower in the history of mankind.

When he finally finishes up, Richie listens to the creak of the faucet knobs in the bathroom, having already set up the sheets on his bed while giving himself a *lovely* round of self-flagellation for having been a *total fucking dick* earlier and running his mouth like an idiot when Eds was already upset.

He's still working through a possible apology in his head when Eddie steps out of the bathroom.

Steam billows out of the bathroom behind him; Eds has never taken a shower at less than boil-me-alive temperatures, even before this whole dying-and-coming-back thing. His face is a little flushed from it, his hair a little damp, and he's drying his hands on his towel even though his flannel pajama pants would be perfectly fine for drying them, in Richie's opinion. He's also staring resolutely down at the cabin floor.

Richie's about elbow deep in his own duffel bag in the midst of searching for something to wear to bed, and he takes his hands out only to stuff them in the pockets of his sweats.

Just fuckin' say it.

"Okay, so, look, I'm sorry for—"

"You were right."

"Uh." Richie pauses. Then he blinks, gives his head a little shake, and says, "Sorry? I'm not used to hearing those words in that order in your voice, care to run that by me one more—?"

"Fuck off, I'm not done."

Richie pulls his hands out of his pockets and crosses his arms, watching Eddie with vested interest. "Okay, man. All ears over here, lay it on me."

Eddie hangs his towel on a peg by the bathroom door, looks at it for a second, shakes his head, and then grabs it again and stuffs it into the little portable hamper he'd brought with him for the trip, the one for dirty clothes. Because of course he brought a fucking hamper on a camping trip.

Then he takes a breath and holds his hand up, in front of his face like he does when he's about to go on one of his Patented Eddie Rants.

"You were right," he says again, looking dead center at Richie. "I do worry a lot, and that is okay because I *can't* help it, and sometimes *nobody's* worried about things and there needs to be *somebody* worrying about things or everything's gonna go to shit, and that's okay, but that's not what's going on here. You're right. Because everything's probably not gonna go to shit this time! I mean, I died, and I'm alive again, and Stan's alive again and Georgie's alive again, and hundreds of other people are alive again and— and you're right! There's a ton of shit about this that I don't understand, and none of us understand it, and none of us are *going* to understand it any time soon, so I *should* stop agonizing over it, and I *should* just live, and I *am* braver than I think, and I'm just gonna fucking— I'm gonna live my life, because I can now, because I'm *alive*, and I'm gonna stop running circles in my fucking head and making myself miserable and I'm gonna do whatever the fuck I want! You were right!"

"Uh." Richie licks his lips, squints. "Okay?"

Eddie's got his hands on his hips now, chest heaving after his rant, and he nods. "Okay. Yeah."

"Good," Richie says, shoulders up to his ears in a helpless shrug.

Because Eddie doing what he wants is— it is, it's *good*, it's something he should have been doing since day fucking one, and not just day fucking one since he came back from the dead, day fucking one *period*. It's something Richie spent the vast majority of his adolescence trying to poke and prod out of him, trying to get him to loosen up, to slip out of his mother's suffocating presence, to be free and happy and a little closer to *himself* instead of the person everyone else was trying to mold him into being.

"Yeah," Eddie agrees again. "Good."

Richie can't help lifting his shoulders, shrugging again like an idiot, nodding like a bobblehead. "Great."

"I'm gonna do what I want to do," Eddie repeats, but it somehow

sounds like he's not talking to Richie anymore. He's also not looking at Richie anymore, either, more like he's staring *through* Richie, eyes unfocused but pointed somewhere around the vicinity of his neck.

"Okay? Uh. Yeah. Good."

"I'm gonna do what I want to do, and I'm not gonna worry about it."

"Right," Richie says, struggling to put a pin on why Eddie looks like his own brain is misfiring, like there should be smoke coming out of his ears and an *Error 404* message on his forehead. "Yeah. Uh, sure. I mean, like, yeah, but— listen, Eds, if this is your way of telling me you're finally giving into the temptation to murder me, I gotta say, it would have been a little smarter to do it about three hours ago, man. I mean, middle of the woods, nobody around, *great* place to hide a—"

Eddie closes his eyes, exhaling loudly through his nose as he shakes his head. "Jesus fucking Christ, I cannot believe—"

But he doesn't say what it is that he *cannot believe*, because at that moment he takes exactly three steps forward, grabs Richie by the collar of his shirt, and tugs him down until—

Oh, Richie thinks, oh so eloquently, because all rational thought has been swiftly punted straight out of his brain. He'd been far too bewildered to do anything but comply with the manhandling, and now here he is, bent slightly at the waist, with his brain on the fritz and all the air stuck in his lungs with nowhere to go and his arms still crossed and Eddie's right hand clutched on the collar of his t-shirt and Eddie's left hand on the back of his neck and *Eddie's mouth on his mouth*.

There's a few half-formed thoughts rattling around in there somewhere, Richie thinks, maybe, but it all kind of zeroes in on a vague sense of confusion and one big ball of heat that starts at his mouth and shoots all the way down through his stomach.

Eddie is... *not* a gentle kisser.

Richie doesn't have time to dwell on that either, though, because one second their faces are smashed together with so much force that

Richie can't really get enough give to breathe much less *reciprocate*, and the next second the heel of Eddie's palm gently presses into his sternum until their lips come apart, all that heat siphoned from his stomach and pulled out through his throat between one heartbeat and the next.

"Guh?"

Eddie does not answer Richie's very eloquent question. He's trembling a little bit and breathing like he's just run a goddamn marathon but his eyes are half-lidded and focused down on Richie's mouth, and he's still clutching Richie's shirt in his right hand, and the thumb of his left hand sweeps through the hairs at the nape of Richie's neck which — *fuck* — sends a shiver all the way down his spine and straight to his groin.

Holy goddamn *shit*.

"You— I—" Richie tries to say, fails, and tries again. "That was—"

"Something I wanted to do," Eddie says, nodding, and his voice is low and heady in a way that Richie has never, not once, heard from him in his entire life.

And that is so not where Richie was going with that, he was going to say something more along the lines of *that was a thing that just fucking happened, huh*, but his brain catches up to what Eddie said and he cocks his head to the side, feels confusion nest itself in his face.

A feeling swells up in his chest that is definitely not hope, fuck off, it's not.

"Something you—? What, with—? With *me*?"

Eddie blinks, and his half-lidded eyes go wide without moving away from Richie's mouth. He opens his own mouth, shuts it, opens it again, and then he finally shoots an incredulous glare up at Richie's eyes and says in a much less punched out voice, "No, actually, I was looking for Ben but you happened to be standing in front of me, so I thought, *sure, why not Richie?* What the fuck kind of—? Yes, with you. Jesus Christ. Obviously with you, dumbass."

“Seriously?”

“Yes! Jesus! Fucking seriously,” Eddie says, his face all pinched and irritated and completely adorable, but then after about three or four seconds of Richie just standing there open-mouthed like an idiot, all the irritation falls away and Eddie pulls back another few inches. “Unless— I mean, shit, is that—? Is that okay?”

And Richie can’t help it. A laugh bubbles up and out of him before he can stop it, because *Eddie fucking Kaspbrak* is standing in front of him with his lips a little swollen and his hand tangled in Richie’s hair and asking if it’s *okay* that he wants to kiss him.

I say again, folks, holy goddamn shit.

“Is that okay,” Richie echoes, deadpan. “You’re asking if that’s *okay*.”

Eddie shrugs a little helplessly, that nervous look still on his face. He has not let go of Richie’s shirt *or* taken his hand out of Richie’s hair.

“Fucking— *yeah*, it’s okay!”

That’s all Richie has the patience to articulate, and then he’s surging forward to kiss Eddie again, to kiss him *properly* this time, unfurling his arms and bringing both hands up to either side of Eddie’s stupid fucking face and walking them both forward until Eddie’s back hits the cabin door. Eds makes a soft, broken little sound into his mouth that might be an *oh* but also might be a straight up moan, and his hands fall away from his neck to bunch up the fabric of his shirt around his waist.

Richie sweeps his thumbs over Eddie’s cheekbones, right thumb smoothing over the almost-a-scar there, and he opens his own mouth to deepen the kiss and finds Eddie suddenly *bizarrely* pliant where he’d been nothing but a tense line of aggression only two minutes ago, and Richie pulls back just a fraction, just enough to get some air.

“You good, Eds?”

Eddie’s tongue darts out to wet his lips, chest heaving again, his eyes down on Richie’s mouth again, and once he catches his breath he only says, “Shut up,” and then—

Ah-ha, Richie thinks, *there's* the little fireball from earlier, as Eddie shoves their lips together and throws all of his weight into Richie and backs *him* up now until his calves hit the side of his shitty little cabin bed.

Richie goes careening backward to let the mattress catch his fall, and Eddie follows right along with him, both of them steadfastly ignoring the warning creak from the old bed's frame and the rubbery *squeak* from the camping mattress. Eddie climbs over Richie and grabs his face and suddenly they're pressed together from knees to chest and Eddie gets one leg in between Richie's, and Richie finds it strangely easy to shut off that little nagging voice at the back of his brain that says *be careful, nope nope nope don't let yourself think about that, don't want it*, and without making the conscious decision to move he finds himself grinding up into Eddie's thigh, propping one heel up on the rickety bed frame to get some leverage, and Eddie doesn't even seem to *notice* he's so preoccupied with fingers in Richie's hair and his tongue in Richie's mouth.

Yeah. Richie might die here. His brain is gonna leak out his ears or some shit, holy fuck. He lets his hands roam wherever they want to go, up into Eddie's hair and trailing down his side and rucking up the hem of his sweater and the shirt underneath, because shit, why should he be careful, *Eddie* sure as hell isn't showing any restraint and holy hell, if he thought *he* was fucking eager—

"Jesus," Richie breathes when Eddie pulls back for some air, or so Richie had assumed, until Eddie physically grabs him by the jaw and moves his face out of the way, ducking down and nipping at the skin above his Adam's apple, his free hand tangled in Richie's hair again.

Okay, so Eddie can't do anything without going from zero to a hundred. Including this.

Duly noted.

He's also shutting down just about every brain function Richie has.

"Ho— lee— *fuck*, Eds—"

Eddie had been making a deliberately slow line down the column of

his throat, kissing and sucking on little bits of skin, taking his *sweet goddamn time*, but at the sound of Richie's voice he lifts right back up and cuts him off with his mouth. He brackets Richie's head with his elbows on the mattress, parting Richie's lips with his own and flicking his tongue into Richie's mouth, and then he rocks his hips forward into Richie's and quite possibly the *single* most embarrassing sound in the history of embarrassing sounds comes squeaking its way out from the back of Richie's throat, high-pitched and *needy*, and there is absolutely no way Eddie didn't hear that, but he still seems a little too preoccupied to acknowledge it. Richie groans and digs his fingertips into Eddie's sides and lifts his hips up to meet him, barely breaking from the kiss for long enough to suck on Eddie's bottom lip, dragging it between his teeth before he returns to kissing him full force because *two can play at that game you little shit*.

God, this is insane. This is insane! *How* is this his life right now! They're making out like... well, like a couple of horny teenagers, which they sort of are, except for the part where they're forty goddamn years old. They're making out like they should have done years and years and years ago, like they should have been doing at every single opportunity for at least the past two decades, because if this is what kissing Eddie Kaspbrak is like, Richie's gonna need to go back and revise all his old fantasies and cross out a few lines and tell his younger self, *sorry kiddo, you underestimated him, it is way goddamn better than you're imagining it, fucking trust me*.

Soon, too soon, Eddie pulls away for real and drops his forehead onto Richie's shoulder, his labored breaths tickling along Richie's collarbone.

"Fuck, dude."

"Mm," Richie agrees, again, *oh* so eloquently, and he lets one hand trail up Eddie's back underneath the sweater and the undershirt, heat still roiling in his chest and his stomach and his dick, which— well, *that's* no fucking secret, they've both been hard since Richie's back hit the mattress. "You're, uh," he tries to say, has to pause to draw a great big breath into his lungs. "You're telling me."

"We— we shouldn't, right?" Eddie asks, lifting his head with, it seems, a whole hell of a lot of effort. He braces himself above Richie

with one elbow on the mattress and the other hand on Richie's chest. He won't stop looking at Richie's mouth, but he makes a good show of halving his attention between that and Richie's eyes.

Richie gulps. "Shouldn't... what, Eds?"

"What do you fucking think, *Richard*," Eddie hisses, then his eyes trail further down than his mouth, catching instead on his throat, and he breathes, "*Shit*," and ducks his face down again to kiss at his pulse point.

"Shouldn't— shit?" Richie asks, because Eddie may be short circuiting his entire brain but, come on, the joke was right there. "I mean, if that's what— *oh-ho-kay*, fuck!" He actually digs his nails into Eddie's skin this time, because Eddie just nipped at a particularly sensitive spot behind his jaw and sent the most *fantastic* spike of electricity from his groin all the way up to his shoulders. "If that's what— what you're into, Eddie *Spafghh* —"

Again Eddie cuts him off with his mouth, but only for a second, only for long enough to shut him up. Then he's lifting away again, up on his elbow with his face only inches away from Richie's and with his eyes screwed shut this time.

"I— I'm serious, Richie, really," he groans, like the words actually physically pain him. "We shouldn't— We're not supposed to jump right to— to this, right? I don't— we can't—"

"I dunno, dude, it *feels* like we can—"

"Shut *up*, we're supposed to— I don't know, not just—"

"I mean, sure, not *all* of it obviously, but—"

"Would you just—"

"Not like the campground store sells condoms if it even *was* open this late—"

Eddie lets out a genuine *squeak*, eyes wide, and he shakes his head like he's shooing away a thought. "Richie! That's not even what I'm —"

“Then what are you—”

“I’m *saying* we shouldn’t even be *going* there yet, and—”

“Wait, are you—?”

Richie blinks, cutting himself off this time, and he tips his head back as far as the mattress will allow, which isn’t much. There’s no way Eddie’s getting at what Richie *thinks* Eddie’s getting at. There’s no way, right?

“Are you asking me if I want to take it *slow*?”

“Yes!” Eddie answers right away, in spite of all expectations, and then he scrunches up his face and shakes his head and stammers, “No, I mean, I don’t— I’m not— I’m saying we’re *supposed* to, right? I mean, I don’t want you thinking I’m just trying to—”

“What, get in my pants?” Richie asks, and despite the desperate little throb of *want* that’s making it nearly impossible not to rock his hips up again, Richie manages, because there’s something else lighting up in his chest at the moment that takes precedent.

A feeling that, yeah, okay, is definitely something close to hope.

Fine. Shit. Whatever. Fuck.

“Do you *not* want to get in my pants?”

“No! I mean— yes, obviously, *fuck*, come on, if that wasn’t *fucking obvious enough already*, you really needed me to say it out loud, you fucking *dickhead*, but—” Eddie gulps, Richie can’t help watching the movement of his throat, and then Eddie takes a deliberately slow breath and opens his eyes. “Don’t— I just—”

“Don’t you just...?”

“*Fuck* you, Rich, you know what I’m trying to fucking say,” Eddie says, biting his lip for a second and totally betraying the acidity in his tone by placing his hand on Richie’s face again and stroking his thumb back and forth along his cheek, which alone might be the single greatest thing Richie Tozier’s ever experienced in his entire

fucking life. Eddie's eyes are on him and they're wide and worried and *wanting*, and Richie could let him off the hook, because he thinks he *does* know what Eddie's trying to say, maybe, but then again that could totally be wish fulfillment, and fuck it, after this long of denying himself maybe he wants to actually *hear* it. Eventually Eddie huffs a sigh and says, "It's *you*, okay? It's... It's important. To me. I don't... I don't want to fuck it up."

And Richie knows, he *knows* he's gotta look like the biggest goddamn sap on the planet, lying here on this shitty camping mattress and smiling up at this person he's been crazy about since he knew what it meant to be crazy about someone, reveling in the not-so-new feeling of *I want him* and reveling even more in the very much brand new feeling of *oh, turns out he wants me, too, whodathunkit?*

Richie might cry, and oh, *God*, would that be the most embarrassing fucking thing in his life or what? He takes a breath to steady himself.

"Eds."

"What?"

"I'm not exaggerating even a *tiny* little bit when I say there is no possible way you could fuck this up," Richie tells him, dragging Eddie's sweater up higher, stroking smooth lines up and down the skin of his back. He's warm as all hell, and for a second Richie's mind detours like it always does, thinks, *Huh, maybe getting laid is the magic cure for the recently-came-back-from-the-dead cold, we should test that.*

He shakes his head, getting himself back on track.

"You really couldn't fuck it up if you tried, man. You could get down on one knee right here and I'd be all fuckin' for it. You wanna go fast, go slow, you wanna fuckin' make out like this for the rest of our fucking lives and screw everything else, I don't care, I'll take whatever I can get, I just..."

That feeling alighting in his chest gets brighter and bigger and *fuller*, and he takes a slow breath to steady himself.

Okay, come on. You got past the scary part.

Come on, Tozier.

"I just... want *you*, Eds. I— I love you," Richie says, and... yep, okay, he definitely just said that. Out loud. While Eddie's on top of him. Fuck. It is something of a relief, finally saying it out loud. It's like how coming out to the losers last week was, it's like how kissing Eddie ten minutes ago was, it's like something huge and heavy and debilitating has suddenly tumbled off his shoulders and he can *breathe* for the first time in fucking decades.

It is also much, *much* more nerve wracking. Fuck.

He could easily walk it back. He's told Eddie he loves him before, told all of them that he loves them before. It would be almost unfairly easy for him to walk it back.

He doesn't.

"I— yeah. Not like *I love you, man*. Like I really, really love you. As in all of it, the whole fuckin'..." Richie makes a vague gesture with his hand, which Eddie can't see anyway because it's behind his back, and he finishes lamely, "Yeah. Basically since for fuckin' ever."

Eddie's face makes the shift from wrecked and horny to flat out stunned in half a second. "You— what? Really?"

Richie nods, and if he's shaking a little, well, he can blame that on the adrenaline, on the whatever-the-fuck is on the table after Eddie was just grinding down on him not three minutes ago. Yeah, sure, *that's* why he's shaking.

"What, are you waiting on a 'psych' or some shit? 'Cause it's not— I mean, come on, were the first two realls not enough? I can say it a couple million more times if that—"

For the third time in however many minutes, Eddie cuts him off by kissing him, and Richie has to admit that he is A-OK with Eddie shutting him up as long as he keeps doing it like *this*.

Eddie keeps it slower this time, gentler, and he's just steady enough that Richie realizes his own shaking is *extremely* obvious now, fuck, but... that's okay. It's okay. Eddie's still kissing him and he keeps

doing that fucking *heart melting* thing where he strokes his thumb across Richie's face, and Richie leaves one hand on Eddie's waist and brings the other up to the back of his neck, and they kiss and they kiss and they kiss until Richie doesn't quite feel like he's gonna shake out of his fucking skin anymore.

"Me, too," Eddie says when they part for air, and he's breathless and red-faced and biting his own lip the way Richie had done to him half a second before he pulled away. "Just— by the way. If you didn't already know. Me, too."

"Yeah?" Richie asks, yanking him back down and muffling the answering *yeah* with his mouth, then arching up to kiss along Eddie's throat. "How long?"

"God, fucking seriously, you're really—" Eddie chokes out, letting out a trembling sigh when Richie gets his lips above Eddie's collarbone and sucks on the skin there, "— asking that *now*?"

"Mm-hmm," Richie hums, trailing little gentle pecks right back up toward the spot behind Eddie's jaw, the spot that had driven *Richie* fucking insane, and he gently bites down there, sliding his hands up Eddie's sides as he does it and earning the most compelling head-to-toe shudder for his efforts. "Well?"

"You're such— a fucking— *asshole*," Eddie grits out between heaving breaths.

"Hey, cut me some slack, I've only been dreaming about doing this with you since I *knew what sex was*, so excuse me—"

"Still an asshole—"

Richie hums in agreement, without a trace of irony, and he tugs purposefully at Eddie's sweater until he gets the hint and tugs it and the undershirt up and over his head in one semi-coordinated movement, tossing it in the general direction of who-fucking-cares where before bending back down and putting his mouth on Richie's again, sliding his tongue in between Richie's teeth, trying to distract him.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Richie says, throwing his head back as far as the mattress allows, which again isn’t much, but it’s enough to grant him the space to speak. It also bares his throat, which Eddie wastes no time in turning his attention to. “Answer the— *KUH-huh— fuck!*” he cries out, because Eddie just hooked two fingers into the waistband of his pants *and* sucked on the bit of skin beneath his jaw at the same time, not fucking fair— “the *question*, Kaspbrak!”

“Jesus fucking—” Eddie mutters, holding Richie’s face again while he props himself up above him and glares down. “Always, asshole! Fucking always! Obviously! Christ!”

“Really?”

“Yes, *really*,” Eddie says, in a passable impression of Richie’s voice, twisting his face up as he does it. “God. Fuck. I just— I didn’t really know what it was, okay? But it was always— there. Always.”

“Yeah?” Richie asks, grinning wide, feeling warm and punch drunk and in love.

Eddie presses his lips together, trying and failing not to mirror Richie’s smile, and then dips down to kiss him, gentler than the annoyance in his voice should probably allow. “Yeah.”

“Okay, but like—”

“Oh, my God! How! How are you *still* talking—”

“— you didn’t know what it was, but you do now?”

“Yes! Holy shit, what part of my tongue in your mouth made that unclear—”

“But when? When’d you figure it out? Was this a sudden epiphany like twenty minutes ago because of my incredible monologue or what—*hah!* Shit, *fuck*, okay,” Richie breathes, throwing his head back again. “Yeah,” he croaks, his voice a tiny little thing in the wake of the electricity tingling through his stomach, what with Eddie’s palm gently pressing *directly* into his dick through the very fucking thin barrier of his sweats. “Yeah. Yep. You win. Shutting up now.”

Eddie grins into the next kiss, lifting his hand away to get both hands on either side of Richie's face again and shifting his weight so that the whole line of their bodies are pressed flush against each other, and Richie's entire vocabulary is quickly reduced to different variations of the word *oh*. Eddie's warm and solid and he's stealing all the breath out of his lungs, stealing every coherent thought from his brain, running both hands through Richie's hair and tugging *just* so, moving Richie's head into whatever angle he pleases, and at first he seems content to keep fucking making out forever, but then he tugs and forces Richie's chin up and his lips are hot on Richie's throat again and, hold the fuck up, does he *realize* he's grinding down into Richie's hips or is he just fucking *doing* that without meaning to? Richie can't tell and profoundly does not give a shit, at least not until Eddie gets his mouth just above Richie's collarbone and rolls his hips down and the slide of his thigh against Richie's dick is about three hundred times more sensation than he can handle at the moment and he realizes it's gonna take about — *oh, sure, let's give him the benefit of the doubt here, folks* — three more good thrusts like that before these sweatpants are fuckin' toast.

And, well, *that* will not fucking do.

No, sir.

He sucks in a breath, steels himself, and wraps an arm around Eddie's waist, flipping them both over until—

“Jesus fucking— *Richie!*”

— until their positions are reversed and Eddie's flat on his back, glaring up at him for having the audacity to interrupt his personal mission to turn every inch of Richie's neck fucking purple.

“What, Eds?”

“You almost brained me on the fucking headboard, that's what,” Eddie tells him, but apparently it's not *that* big a problem, because he tugs Richie down by the shirt collar to kiss him again.

“Well I couldn't...” Richie murmurs between kisses, “... couldn't let you have all the fun.”

And this is an entirely new experience, isn't it? He's got the height advantage and the weight advantage, so he can sink down into Eddie and keep him from moving at all, which is either going to drive Eddie nuts in a bad way or drive him nuts in a really, really good way.

Judging by the uneven woosh of breath Eds lets out, it's the good way. Richie grabs hold of Eddie's hand, the one that's not fisted on his shirt, and laces their fingers together and presses their hands down into the mattress, which immediately draws a sound from Eddie that borders on a fucking *whimper*. He jerks his hips directly up into Richie's, and as Richie starts making his way down Eddie's throat, Eddie releases his hold on Richie's shirt collar trails his hand up and up and up until it's tangled in Richie's hair.

Richie only pauses twice as he kisses his way down toward Eddie's waist.

Once, when he lifts up onto his elbow, half his weight still in the other hand where he's holding one of Eddie's down into the mattress, and he realizes— Eds doesn't have a scar. The spot between his ribs is totally unmarked, nothing to indicate that he'd ever been hurt there at all, let alone been fucking *impaled* two weeks ago.

Impaled because he *saved Richie's life*. Jesus.

Richie's not sure what he'd have done if there *was* a mark, if Eddie's chest still looked like it had recently been ripped open, if it was all mottled scar tissue bordering a hole in his chest instead of unblemished skin. Probably the same thing he does now, if he's honest. He strokes a thumb over the spot where a scar would be, then dips down and kisses there, once, twice, three times, and he forces himself to move on. He lets go of Eddie's hand and slowly makes his way down lower.

The *second* time Richie pauses, it's when he kisses just above the waistband of Eddie's pajama pants and Eddie, seemingly involuntarily, rolls his hips up.

Richie peers up at him. If he had had his wits about him during *any* of this and his brain wasn't just a mash of intelligible horny goop between his ears, he'd have probably taken off his glasses by now,

but as it is he just looks through the smudged lenses and sees a more-or-less distinct image of Eddie's chest moving, of the underside of his chin.

"This okay?" Richie asks, barely tugging at the string of his pants.

Eddie's grip in his hair tightens. "Rich, if you leave me hanging any longer, I swear to fucking *God*."

"Oh, but baby, I thought we were taking it slow," Richie teases, tracing a finger along the line of his waistband, and the laugh Eddie answers with is all breath. "A girl could get the wrong idea, Eds."

"God, *fuck* you, man," Eddie laughs, dragging his nails over Richie's scalp before gently gripping his hair again. His laugh ends in a stuttering breath, half a whine drawn from the back of his throat when Richie finally relieves him of his pajama pants and his boxer briefs all at once with a firm tug. "Fucking— God, *fuck*," he breathes, as Richie leans back to toss his pants in a random direction and quickly yanks off his own shirt and gives it the same treatment. And then, finally, he takes off his glasses and drops them haphazardly on the far corner of the mattress. "Fuck, just— Rich, please—"

As if he needed to ask.

And the thing is, going down on a guy has always been a sort of novelty for Richie. Nothing crazy exciting, not like he's super all about it, but it's rare, if for no other reason than because Richie's hardly ever mustered up the balls to actually hook up with a guy without feeling some kind of way about it. And so: novelty. He never particularly *disliked* it, but he also never really bought it when anyone — in porn or in real life — acted like they got off on it.

But going down on Eds, well. Richie thinks he might get it now. Any thought of his own enjoyment is miles away, all his focus narrowed down to the fucking *incredible* sounds coming out of Eddie right now, the way his hand tightens in Richie's hair, the way he's so clearly trying to resist the urge to buck his hips up or pull Richie's head down — which is sweet, but Richie wants Eddie focusing on the important shit, so he grips him by the hips and holds him down onto the bed and goes as deep as he possibly can, which as it turns out is

almost all the way to the base.

“*Fu-huck*, Rich—”

Richie hums into it, and from there he just mimics all the stuff he knows *he* likes, zeroes in on Eddie and concentrates on making this as good as fucking possible. He has spent a truly embarrassing amount of time thinking about this, and now that he’s here, he’s gonna make it *count*. He’s whipping out every trick in the fucking book, trailing his tongue all the way up to flick at the tip, bringing one hand into the mix while the other arm works at holding Eddie down, starting off slow and fucking *meticulous* and bringing the pace up bit by bit, racking up the insensivity.

That’s when Eddie’s breath starts to pick up, the muttered curses quickly losing coherency and dissolving into nothing, his grip tightening in Richie’s hair until there’s a sweet sting at the nape of his neck — and God, Richie is *painfully* turned on at this point, this was supposed to make him last longer and it’s having the exact fucking opposite effect — and then all thoughts of finishing too soon go right out the fucking window, because Eddie jerks under him and lets out a crackly little half-syllable of a sound and crests over that hill himself.

Richie does not even consider an alternative to swallowing it. One, he is a fucking *gentleman*, thank you, and two, well, he doesn’t exactly have the presence of mind to do anything else.

He’s gonna be replaying this shit in his head for the rest of his fucking *life*.

Eddie pants and heaves, gives Richie’s hair a gentle half-assed tug to bring him back up, and of course Richie obliges, climbs up until he’s chest-to-chest with Eddie again. He leans down and kisses Eddie’s cheek, since he’s not *totally* sure kissing on the mouth is on the table anymore and he doesn’t want to push it.

“Still with me, Eduardo?”

Eddie doesn’t seem capable of words, but he gives a jerky nod, his hands warm where they’re fumbling at Richie’s bare sides. He turns

his head enough to press a breathy kiss to Richie's temple, and then he's got his fingers hooked over Richie's waistband again.

"I, uh—" Richie lets out a choked laugh, "I gotta be honest, Eds— I'm not— I'm not gonna last long, here, it's— *fuck*," he croaks, burying his face into the pillow as Eddie gets one hand around him, "uh, like, this is— it's gonna be— fuckin' *stupid* quick—"

"It's okay," Eddie murmurs, turning enough so that he can kiss Richie's neck again. He's still panting, still in the midst of coming down. "That's fine, Rich, it's okay." His breath is hot on Richie's neck. "Go ahead, I wanna see."

"Jesus shit, Eds, you can't just fuckin' *say* that and expect me— *oh*, fuck, *fuck*, shit, okay."

Richie's really glad his face is in the pillow, because he has absolutely zero control over it, or any other part of him for that fucking matter. Eddie keeps mouthing at his neck, keeps breathing against him, his hand gently working up and down and up and down, and it's all Richie can do not to thrust into him with everything he's got, and he tries to hold it off, he *really* does, but then Eddie picks up the pace and his breathing picks up, too, and Richie tenses up and rocks his hips into Eddie's hand, and Eddie whispers into Richie's neck, "*There you go, come on, Rich,*" and he is a total fucking goner after that, shoving his face as firmly into the pillow as he can to muffle the sound he makes as he comes, riding it out with little thrusts into Eddie's hand.

Eddie's still kissing him. His neck, the spot behind his jaw, his temple, over and over again as the oxygen very slowly trickles back into his brain.

When it does, Richie cannot hold himself up anymore and just collapses, lets all his weight fall on top of Eddie with a shuddering breath, and he does not lift his face from the pillow. His boxers are *rapidly* cooling and objectively it's gross that he still has them on, but Eddie doesn't seem to mind. The hand that just coaxed a truly mind-blowing orgasm out of him is nowhere to be found, but the other drags up and down his back, a light touch that raises goosebumps as it moves along his spine.

That was— a lot. That just happened.

That just happened.

Fuck.

“Rich?”

“Mm.” Richie shifts, wraps his arms around Eddie’s waist and settles himself with his face in Eddie’s neck instead of the pillow, and he grits his teeth and swallows a couple times. He’s fine. He’s good. He’s —

“You good?”

Richie nods. *I am so fucking in love with you I could puke*, he thinks, and also, *I have literally never cried after sex but I’m only hanging on by a thread now for some reason so give me a fucking second*, Edward, and instead all he says is, “Mm-hmm.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Richie says, and it comes out as a sigh. Once he has better control over his voice, he raises an eyebrow that Eddie can’t see and manages a shaky, “You just fucked my brains out, man, that’s all.”

Eddie smacks him lightly with the hand that’s been trailing up and down his back. “*What brains, dude?*”

Richie snorts, grinning like an idiot, and he can feel Eddie shaking as he laughs, too. “Oh, wow. Eddie Spaghetti gets off a *good* one, folks.”

“Yeah, I sure fucking did.”

If Richie’s face weren’t tucked into Eddie’s neck, his jaw would have dropped.

Oh, my God. I love you. I love you so much.

“Hey, so, um, I’m gonna say something,” Richie murmurs, “but it’s gonna make you *super* horny all over again, and you gotta remember I’m forty years old and I need, like, at least another ten minutes

before I'm down to do that again, so try to control yourself, okay?"

"Oh, I can't wait to fucking hear this," Eddie mutters under his breath. "What?"

Richie moves, pushes himself up onto his hands and peers down at the blurry rendition of Eddie's face, and he puts on his most ridiculously un-sexy seductive voice and purrs, "I think we both need to get off this bed and take a *shower*, Eds."

And if there's any magic left in the world after it all got used up killing that clown and bringing everybody back, Richie thinks, this is it. The magic is right here, it's in the thrumming space between them, and it rings clear as fucking day in Eddie's answering laugh.

Eddie returns to awareness in the same way he'd left it: slowly, heavy lidded and content, drifting lazily on the outskirts of sleep. He's still lying on the greatest insult to mattresses on the planet, as evidenced by dull throb in his shoulder and the warning stiffness in his lower back, the kind that doesn't hurt now but is definitely going to wreck his shit the second he actually gets up, but...

Well, that's fine. He doesn't really want to get up anyway.

His arms are still banded around Richie's ribs, and plants his face in the soft cotton of Richie's t-shirt between his shoulder blades. The sunlight streaming into the cabin snuffs out, Eddie's whole field of vision reduced to nothing but black, all his senses condensed down to

the warmth of the brand new plush comforter he bought two days ago and Richie's slow rhythmic breathing.

It might as well still be the middle of the night when he's lying like this.

But then, too soon, Richie stirs.

It's slow at first, a break in the pattern of his breath, a steady inhale through his nose that lasts too long and puffs up his whole torso, and then he lifts his head off the pillow.

Eddie gives a warning hum, the kind that he hopes conveys the thought of *don't move asshole I'm comfortable*, but Richie does not take the hint. As usual. Instead he twists at the waist, shimmying around under the covers and dislodging Eddie's grip around his middle, so Eddie has no choice but to roll over onto his back with an annoyed huff as Richie props himself up on one elbow, looming over Eddie with his stupidly tall body.

His hair is an absolute trainwreck — which, okay, *that* is partially Eddie's fault, it didn't return to normal even after their shower, and that thought goes ahead and sends all the blood rushing to his cheeks with no regard for whether he wants it there or not — and his eyes are blinking slowly, lethargically, only half focused.

"Uh." Eddie frowns. "Hello?"

Richie squints down at him and then, for some fucking reason, starts peering around the room as if he can't figure out where he is.

"What—? Dude. What the hell are you doing?"

"I dunno, man, I'm just..." Richie trails off, looking over his shoulder. His voice is slurred with sleep. "Just trying to figure out where the camera crews are."

"The *what*?"

"The camera crews, y'know," Richie says, then turns back toward Eddie and pokes him gently on the nose. "'Cause there's no way I'm actually waking up to this right now. No fuckin' way, man. I'm not

falling for it, I'm definitely getting punk'd."

The confusion falls away, and Eddie directs a deadpan stare up at him.

"Wow."

"No, seriously—"

"Wow."

"For real, man! What's-his-name is gonna come in that door right now and—"

"Okay, first of all, *what's his name*, you know exactly who the fuck Ashton Kutcher is, Richie. And second of all, that is the most dated joke I have ever heard in my *entire* fucking life," Eddie tells him, swiping a hand in front of his face. He'd been worried, in a sort of distant way, that the morning might be anxiety-inducing and awkward and stilted after— well, *after*, but it turns out he's too busy being absolutely baffled by Richie to bother with any other emotion at all. At least for the moment. "I mean, for fuck's sake, how you make actual real money doing this for a living I will never understand. And dude, even if it was *two-thousand-and-fucking-five*, you know, the year that joke would have actually been sort of remotely relevant, you wouldn't have been famous enough to be on Punk'd anyway."

"Everyone's a critic," Richie tries to say through a yawn, the traces of a smile lingering on his face after Eddie's spiel. "Anything else, Dr. K?"

"Yes, actually. Your morning breath is atrocious."

"Ah, *damn* it," Richie laments, allowing his arm to collapse underneath him so he flops down onto his stomach. Eddie's left arm ends up pinned under his chest. "And here I thought your mom's appreciation for my morning breath was gonna be genetic—"

"God, what's it like, huh?" Eddie asks. "What is it like, being the single least funny comedian on the face of the Earth?"

Richie hums a noncommittal sound into the pillow and shrugs, then turns enough to peer up at Eddie with one eye, something that might be half a smile but also might be something else entirely pulling at the one visible corner of his mouth.

“I dunno,” he mumbles. “What’s it like sleeping with him?”

Oh, yeah, sure. As if Eddie’s face wasn’t red enough already.

There’s something in Richie’s voice, though, something past the teasing and the sleepy grating quality of it, that hits the brakes on Eddie’s gut instinct to fire back with one of a thousand smartass comments he could make, and instead he looks up at the ceiling — he *cannot* look Richie in the eye when he says this or he will combust on the spot — and he answers honestly, “It was nice.”

“Wow,” Richie drawls. “Nice. What a glowing review.”

“Really? You need a *glowing review*, asshole? How full of yourself can you possibly be? *Don’t*,” Eddie cuts him off with a warning glare, because there’s definitely some terrible joke rising up Richie’s throat about who was full of who last night. Richie laughs softly as Eddie brings his gaze back to the ceiling.

“Oh, come on, Eds, the joke’s *right there*.”

“Yeah, it’s low hanging fruit, dude.”

Richie shrugs again. Eddie can feel the movement of it, half on top of him, and see it in his peripheral. “Seriously, though?”

“Seriously though what?”

“Seriously though, it was nice?”

A beat of silence. Eddie turns his head, craning his neck a bit so he can actually see Richie’s face, which ends up being a fruitless endeavor since his face is about ninety percent buried in the pillow. What little of his face is visible is about ten shades too red, though, so Eddie grabs him by the first thing he can reach — his upper arm — and tugs at him until he’s forced to prop himself up on his elbow again, looming over Eddie with his hair all fucking over the place and

his expression a perfect familiar blend of carefully curated calm and sky-high anxiety.

Eddie tugs him right back down with a hand on the back of his neck, and this time Richie takes the hint. He catches himself with his left hand braced on the mattress and his right elbow still by Eddie's shoulder, dipping down for the kiss with nothing but a pleased hum against Eddie's mouth.

It is... *exactly* as perfect as the first kiss last night had been.

Like tension breaking. Like building blocks slotting into place.

"What, uh..." Richie sighs when they pull apart, his eyes closed. "What happened to my morning breath?"

"Still fucking atrocious," Eddie assures him. His lets the hand on the back of Richie's neck travel down, lightly tracing a path over his shoulder and his collarbone until his palm comes to rest over his heart. "Wanted to do that anyway, though."

Richie's eyes open. He looks absolutely fucking dumbstruck. His Adam's apple bobs. "Yeah?"

Eddie presses his lips together to keep from smiling like a lovesick moron, which only works for about three seconds. "Yeah, Rich. Because it was *nice*. Really nice."

Richie lets out a breath that is, of course, still disgusting — he really needs to brush his teeth, they *both* do — and then his arms give out so that his head falls directly onto Eddie's shoulder, that gross morning breath ghosting along Eddie's chest instead of being puffed directly into in his face.

He doesn't move, just lying there, and Eddie fits a few strands of his hair between his fingers. It still somehow smells like coffee.

"You know, if I knew it was gonna render you speechless, I would've done that forever ago, Trashmouth."

Richie's answering laugh is so quiet it's only detectable by the shake of his shoulders. "Mm."

“You okay?”

“Mm-hmm. Yeah,” Richie says, somewhat convincingly. “Just, uh... gonna have to give me a second to adjust, Eds.”

“Adjust to what?”

“The fuck you think, man? This,” Richie says without any heat at all, blindly waving a hand in a gesture that might be meant to encompass both of them. His hand settles back down somewhere around Eddie’s waist. “This... even being a *thing*, even being fuckin’ possible, I mean, shit, until about a week ago nobody even knew I was... you know.” He doesn’t say it, and Eddie doesn’t make him, only hums in sympathy— or empathy, really, he supposes. Not like he’s even said it aloud *once* about himself, not yet. Richie kisses right where he’s at, which happens to be the dip between Eddie’s collarbone and his shoulder, and he continues, “And then a few days before *that*, you weren’t even...”

He doesn’t say that aloud either, and Eddie nods. “Yeah.”

There’s a second or two in which they both just lie there, Eddie dragging his fingers through Richie’s hair, pulling through a strand at a time. Then Richie pushes himself up so that he can look Eddie in the eyes again. Or as much of his eyes as he can probably see, anyway, since he’s still without his glasses.

“How’re you feeling about that whole thing, anyway?” Richie asks. His gaze skirts down to Eddie’s chest, and he lifts one hand to tap one knuckle against Eddie’s sternum, which is still as unmarred as it’s been since the day he woke up in that cave under Neibolt.

Richie had kissed there, too, last night. Several times.

“Better,” Eddie answers, honestly.

“Not worried you’re gonna go full Pet Sematary on us anymore?”

“I didn’t *actually* think I was gonna go full Pet Sematary, dude,” Eddie reminds him. “It’s a metaphor.”

“I’m like at least sixty percent sure that’s not what a metaphor is.”

"It's the *idea*, Rich, the whole dead things staying dead... thing," Eddie says. "And anyway, no, I'm not... as worried. As I was."

"Real convincing there, Eds."

"I mean it. I'm not. Really. Not as much. I'm still gonna worry about it a little bit, yeah, obviously, but..." Eddie trails off when a new thought occurs to him. "You know, I don't think I had a turtle dream last night."

"No?"

Eddie shakes his head.

"So, what, you think our Great Turtle Overlord got the message that he was making your anxiety worse and finally fucked off, or...?"

Eddie thinks about that for a second, then admits, "I don't know. I don't think so."

He runs one hand up and down Richie's arm, the one that's still braced against the mattress by his head, without even really thinking about it until after he's already done it. And it's funny, he thinks, how easy it is, how automatic— but then again, they've always been a little extra touchy with each other, haven't they? Even back when they were kids.

Makes sense that touching Richie would still come this easily, this naturally, even with the new added context. He leaves his hand where it is.

"I still think those dreams were... supposed to be telling me something, I guess?" Eddie goes on. "But I don't know. Maybe it wasn't so much, like... an 'enjoy it while it lasts' kind of thing and more like a... I don't know, like a 'get off your ass, stop getting in your own way and making yourself miserable the way you always do and start actually *living*'... kind of... thing. I don't know. Does that make sense?"

Richie hums, nodding along and somehow avoiding eye contact even while he's hovering with his entire body over Eddie's.

“And I don’t know,” Eddie says, abruptly aware of the fact that he can’t stop throwing in an *I don’t know* every five seconds, but really, he doesn’t. “Maybe the turtles or the hundreds of turtles or whatever, maybe they were like, mad that I spent... what, over half my life? Half my life being miserable and just kind of... floating— okay, wow, no, *such* a bad choice of words.” He scrunches his eyes shut and shakes his head. “Coasting.”

“Better.”

“Thank you. But, yeah, I was spending all that time just... coasting along, you know? Existing and being miserable about it. And now that I’m actually, like, doing things I *like* and actually *living*, maybe the turtles are... satisfied? And they left? I really don’t know, dude.”

“So... what we did last night,” Richie says, squinting at the space of pillow above Eddie’s head, “you’re thinking that qualifies as...?”

Heat fans across Eddie’s cheekbones again, and quickly spreads to his entire face. He ignores it and, since Richie seems incapable of finishing the question himself, Eddie finishes for him, “... As actually living?”

Richie glances down, finally makes eye contact. He shrugs.

Eddie asks, “What if it does?”

And another one of those dopey smiles spreads across Richie’s face, slowly, until his cheeks are apple up and his eyes crinkle with it, and Eddie thinks he could live with causing that smile again and again for a long, long time.

God, he thinks, not for the first time, how the *hell* had he forgotten this?

How the hell had he forgotten Richie?

“Well,” Richie says, drawing Eddie from his thoughts. He’s bobbing his head from side to side like he’s just thinking, spitballing, throwing ideas around. “In that case, we could always do that again, I mean—in the interest of keeping our Great Turtle Overlord out of your head, of course. If you think it’d help.”

Eddie laughs so hard he actually *snorts*. It is a very unattractive sound, but you wouldn't know it from the look Richie's giving him.

"Oh, only if I think it'd help, huh?"

"I would make that sacrifice for you, Eds, I am an incredibly selfless person," Richie says, dipping down to press a kiss to his cheek. His hand comes up to the other side of Eddie's face, gently holding him there while he trails kisses down toward his jaw, peppering them in a line along the column of his throat the way he'd done last night, which picks Eddie's heart rate *right* the fuck back up.

"Yeah, a little—" Eddie starts to say, then has to pause to suck in a breath, "— a little *too* selfless, dickhead, I didn't even get to reciprocate—"

The sentence is hardly out of his mouth before Richie jerks upward, poised entirely on top of him with his palms against the mattress, blinking wide barely-focused eyes down at Eddie's face. His jaw drops. "You...? Really? You wanted to?"

"What? What the fuck do you mean of *course* I—"

There's a warm hand on the small of his back, and then the entire room spins around him as Richie flops over onto his back and tugs Eddie right along with him, with an ease that's really only possible because Eddie takes the hint and cooperates. The bed creaks dangerously but remains standing as Eddie situates himself with his knees bracketing Richie's hips, sinking his weight down into Richie's pelvis.

It draws a *very* nice sound from Richie, who doesn't even seem to notice, too busy staring up at Eddie like he put the goddamn stars in the sky. The fucking *sap*.

"Holy shit, Eds."

Eddie raises an eyebrow, fighting to maintain as deadpan an expression as he can. "Yeah, you're really making a sacrifice for me here, huh?"

Richie gulps, nods. "Mm-hmm. Yep."

“Oh, I can tell. This must be *so* hard for you.”

Richie laughs, but it's a tremulous sort of laugh that's nothing but breath. He's still smiling wide when he says, “I gotta be honest, man, I know there's a joke in there somewhere 'cause you just said the word *hard*, but my whole brain pretty much shut off after you implied you'd actually be down to—”

He's cut off by a horrifyingly sudden *clang* from the direction of the cabin door.

Richie lets out a genuine squeak of fright as Eddie scrambles off of him, his heart having already leapt up into his throat and pounding at a mile a minute, and he vastly overestimates how much bed space was available because he promptly *falls off of it* and tumbles onto the very cold cabin floor in a heap of limbs with the comforter tangled around his ankles.

“Guys—?”

“What the *shit*—”

“— in the *goddamn*—”

“*Woah, relax, it's me—!*”

Richie's grabbed the nearest thing he can use as a weapon, which happens to be an empty mug that he'd left on the windowsill above the bed yesterday, and he's holding it up now like he really thinks he's gonna fight off an intruder with, of all things, a novelty *Acadia National Park* mug with moose antlers on the handle.

Of course, once they realize who's standing in the doorway, that point becomes kind of moot.

“... Oh,” Stanley says, one hand still on the doorknob.

His eyes move from Richie, who's squinting at him and slowly relaxing out of his gonna-pitch-a-ceramic-mug-at-you stance and is sitting on the bed in only boxers and a t-shirt and a throat *covered in hickies*, to Eddie, who's shirtless on the floor with the comforter from *Richie's bed* wrapped around his legs, and then finally to the only

other bed in the cabin, which is still lacking in any sheets whatsoever and very clearly has not been used.

This happens in the span of about three seconds, and in those three seconds, the heat in Eddie's cheeks creeps all the way down his neck and probably flushes as low as his chest.

"*Ohhh*," Stan says, eyebrows raised. Then something else seems to occur to him, and the recognition in his face falls away to make room for annoyance. He drops his head into one hand and groans, "Oh, God *damn* it. You guys really couldn't have held out for another week?"

Eddie blinks, jaw hanging open. "What? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I owe Patty fifty bucks now," Stan mutters, pressing his thumb to the bridge of his nose for a second. He sighs as if to say *oh, well*, and shakes his head. "Anyway, we're all about to—"

Eddie shrieks, "You had a *bet going on this?*"

"You bet *against* us?" Richie asks at the exact same time, sounding aghast, and then he cocks his head to the side and adds, "Wait, don't you guys have like, the same fuckin' bank account or something? Isn't that a thing married people do?"

"It's the principle, Trashmouth," Stanley says, rolling his eyes. "And yes, I bet against you. Thought for sure you were gonna keep dancing around—" he waves nonsensically at both of them— "whatever the hell this is for at least another week. *Anyway*, as I was saying, we're all about to go into town and try out that breakfast place that Mike hasn't stopped talking about for the last three days, *so*, unless you guys would like to be the subject of Georgie's very first 'birds and the bees' talk, you might wanna throw some clothes on and come join us. You got twenty minutes."

With that, Stanley taps the doorway by way of a goodbye. Eddie sees the hint of a smile on his face as he turns away, muttering something under his breath that sounds a whole lot like, *Mazel tov, guys*, and he shuts the cabin door behind him.

The screen door clangs shut a second later, and Richie promptly dissolves into giggles.

“What? What is so fucking funny, dude?”

“I just— I *cannot* fucking believe,” Richie snorts, trying to prop himself up with one arm and nearly falling over again, “that Pat’s known us for, what? Four fuckin’ days? And she knew better than Stanley did! *It’s the principle* indeed, man, I’d be pissed I lost that bet, too.”

Eddie, still sitting with his butt on the floor and the comforter around his legs, chews on his cheek for a second before quietly admitting, “I told her I was thinking about kissing you on Saturday night. So, uh. Technically she had insider information.”

Richie’s now gotten up to sitting with his legs over the edge of the bed and his hands on the mattress, and his jaw drops again as he stares down at Eddie. “You what?”

“I *know*, I know,” Eddie groans, gathering up the comforter and trying to stand. He barely manages not to flinch when his bare feet hit the hardwood. “We’d just met her, and I probably should have told Bill or Stan or somebody else first, but then we were alone on the balcony and we were talking about that kind of thing *anyway*, and I figured she’s a sort of unbiased third party, and—”

“No, no, *dude*,” Richie interrupts, shaking his head. “I mean, you were thinking about it four days ago?”

Eddie freezes, hands tight on the edge of the comforter, and to try and distract himself from the heat that *still has not left his face*, he averts his eyes and sets about folding the comforter into something resembling a neat square.

The campground has a laundry facility, right? It has to. They’re gonna have to wash this before they go to bed again tonight.

“Uh, yeah,” he finally answers Richie’s question. “Actually, uh... Wednesday night? When we were hanging out in my room at the townhouse? With the gin bottle?”

Richie makes a choked sort of noise, enough that Eddie looks in his direction. His eyes are wide. “That was a *week* ago, man.”

“... Yes?”

“We could have been doing this shit for the past *week*, dude?!” Richie shouts, grabbing a pillow and lobbing it in Eddie’s direction, but he’s laughing. “Holy shit, way to string a guy along—”

“Oh, you’re one to talk, dipshit,” Eddie laughs, shaking his head as he drops the folded comforter at the foot of the bed, then stacks the thrown pillow on top of it. Then, in his best impression of Richie’s voice, he says, “*I’ve only been thinking about doing this with you since I knew what sex was*, that’s what you said, so I’m pretty sure you held out on me for way fucking longer, you giant goddamn hypocrite—”

Richie grabs him by the wrist, pulling him in so that he’s standing between Richie’s knees. If Eddie’s being honest it *kind* of pulls the air out of his lungs, as does the way Richie’s looking up at him, all smiley and dopey and in love.

He’s doing that because of Eddie. Because of Eddie just— existing, being himself, with Richie.

“Gotta say, you doing my voice is a real turn-on, Eds.”

“Mm,” Eddie nods, “so a *narcissistic* goddamn hypocrite. Yeah, that definitely tracks.”

Richie laughs, startled but genuine.

Eddie leans down to kiss him again. Because he wants to. Because he can.

“So,” Richie says when they pull apart, settling his hands on Eddie’s waist, fingers tracing along the bare skin of his back. “What were we talking about before Stanley so rudely interrupted? I happen to recall plans to make up for all that lost time, Eduardo.”

“What we were talking about, Richie, is something that is definitely not happening right now,” Eddie reminds him, “because we have to shower—”

“We *just* showered like six hours ag—”

“*We have to shower,*” Eddie speaks over him, “and then put some clothes on, and then go out for breakfast with all of our friends and a six-year-old.”

Richie gives a dramatic put-upon sigh, leaning forward until he’s got his face planted on Eddie’s chest. “Rain check?”

“Rain check,” Eddie agrees, playing with Richie’s hair again.

“Yeah, fuck it,” Richie murmurs with a shrug, loosely wrapping his arms around Eddie’s waist. “No point in rushing it. Got all the time in the world, don’t we, Eds?”

Eddie smiles, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of Richie’s head and leaves his face there. If he had the presence of mind or at least his first morning’s coffee in his system, he might have been able to put this feeling into words, this feeling of— clearness, almost. A clearing out of sorts, of *light*, in every sense of the word, radiance and weightlessness all at once, flowing through him like a windowpane finally wiped clean. Like a revelation.

Not bad, he thinks. *Not bad at all*.

“Yeah,” Eddie murmurs into Richie’s hair, hardly believing it until he says it. “Yeah, we really do.”

Notes for the Chapter:

and then they spend their summers in maine and winters in LA and both attend regular therapy sessions and they go to adrian and don's wedding together and they adopt a massive dog and live happily ever after, it's true i talked to stephen king myself he said that's how it happened

p.s. all the chapter titles are from left at london's
[revolution lover](#)

thank you to anyone that's stuck around this long!
and extra thank you to everyone that's commented or
kudoed or bookmarked, i love all of you and deeply
appreciate your enthusiasm for this "oneshot" that
somehow topped off at 4 chapters and 75k words, i
don't know how that happened either